

# IN EVERY TOWN

## AN ALL-AGES MUSIC MANUALFESTO

How to find the right space, keep the neighbors happy, raise money, and get your scene off the ground

WRITTEN AND COMPILED BY

TION BY KIMYA DAWSON

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# IN EVERY TOWN

## AN ALL-AGES MUSIC MANUALFESTO

WRITTEN AND COMPILED BY SHANNON STEWART

## THE PARTICULARS

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FIRST TRADE EDITION

All-ages Movement Project is a nonprofit network of organizations that produce independent music and art and build power with young people. We cultivate relationships to raise visibility, share knowledge, and expand resources in order to foster social and cultural change.

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The Gossip at Local 46. Photo by Tammy Cartwright.

# A LITTLE BIT ABOUT THIS BOOK

In 2001, I cofounded an all-ages music community organization called the Vera Project in Seattle with James Keblas, Kate Becker, a fairly unrestricted check from the City of Seattle, and a ton of volunteers. I was just turning 23.

The Vera Project grew out of a conversation between James and me when we were studying urban planning in Groningen, the Netherlands, a town of 180,000 people where the biggest age group is 20 -24 years old. Groningen is the home of the legendary VERA club, the center of the international pop underground, whose coolness is hard to match in the confines of U.S. cultural funding.

A few things about VERA in the Netherlands:

- VERA is an acronym for the Latin phrase *veri et recti amici*, which translates to "true and sincere friends."
- It's over 100 years old.
- It started out as a collectively run student organization, morphed into a community center for arts and activism, and, in the past thirty years, has taken its most current shape of a staff-led music and film club with a very active membership.
- The Dutch government pays for it — the government subsidizes nightclubs in Holland as part of its cultural policy.
- It's pretty much the only club in town for touring bands, so it gets the best of them and there is almost always an audience.
- It has a hotel attached to the building where each touring band member gets a room with a bath.
- Artists who play there get fed and paid well.

James and I fell in love with VERA.

Because we saw a model that was so independent, so punk rock and edgy, and still funded by the government, it never occurred to us that our idea to start a club like VERA in Seattle would lead us down the path of youth development and nonprofit management years later. James did the initial research and naturally filled the role of networker and fundraiser. Kate Becker got involved and brought years of experience politicking, booking, promoting all-ages shows, and being a youth advocate. I brought activist and community organizing experience and set about rounding up young people and community members to get involved. We recruited sound engineers, booking agents, and youth workers. Our different skill sets made the partnership work, and Seattle's Vera Project opened in 2001.

At the time we started Vera, I was an avid fan of local music, but I was also thinking a lot about how underground music and fringe arts play a role in building community among young people. I was interested in working with people who wanted to leverage that community-building aspect to create longer-lasting independent spaces and meaningful music opportunities that weren't exclusive or elite, that challenged dominant norms and mainstream culture. This was and is my point of reference, and, though my co-conspirators share some of these feelings, everyone has a different motivation for why they want be involved in art and music at the community or DIY level.

Between 2005 and 2007, all of the founders left the Vera Project. In 2007, the organization moved into a building with a long-term lease; raised $2 million; and continued to run weekend all-ages shows, along with classes in breakdancing, silk-screening, and audio engineering. It was all overseen by a small staff using a community governance structure. The organization has outlasted its founders and has gotten better and stronger.

In 2005, adults and young people from four different music and cultural nonprofit organizations, including the Vera Project, came together to explore the idea of creating a network of organizations like ours. The idea was funded in 2006 as a six-month national research project by a foundation in the San Francisco Bay Area, and I was appointed to the position of coordinator. So the All-ages Movement Project began.

## WHY JUST MUSIC?

The All-ages Movement Project connects music production and alternative cultural spaces to leadership development, youth engagement, the music industry, and political and social landscapes.

It is easy, and even clichéd, to make the argument that music is a universal language that permeates everyone's experience. It's also true. Identifying with a genre, artist, or particular fan group is often the beginning of a young person forming his or her identity.

I'm well into adulthood now, but the experience of being young and finding a place I belonged within a music community stays with me. I grew up on a suburban island. It wasn't a literal island, but it was isolated like one. Though there was no big city that it was attached to, the town felt more like a suburb than a town of its own. I'm talking strip malls, parking lots, and massive residential developments instead of storefronts, sidewalks, and neighborhoods. It's the kind of place where more than 50 percent of the country's population lives.

In my hometown, there were a few options for social and cultural activities as a young person:

- *Sports*. Our economically healthy, extremely segregated public school system poured a lot of money into athletic programs, especially for guys.
- *God-Related Activities*. Sometimes churches put on events that were sort of fun for kids, although youth were still separated out along religious and denominational lines.
- *Drinking, Drugs, and Gangs*. If there wasn't a game or you didn't belong to a church with a hip, guitar-playing youth minister, there really was nothing else to do except go to parties in the middle of nowhere, try to escape via ingesting a substance, and hang out in convenience store parking lots.

In middle school, my Pixies, Public Enemy, and Fugazi tapes and CDs gave my disillusionment some hopeful context. Then, because some very motivated people decided to start putting on shows in a square-dancing club called the Hoedown, I actually survived high school. I finally found a place to be.

The rules that governed school and other adult-run spaces didn't seem to apply. A lot of us were misfits in one way or another, barely making it through the hoops set up by adults, and many were not making it at all. The Hoedown wasn't a perfect and safe environment, but its existence made me

realize how important it was as a young person to be part of community that felt real, that wasn't dividing us based on our academic excellence, our class backgrounds, our religions, or our genders. Music set the stage for that experience.

Lisa Dengiz, one of the founders of the Neutral Zone, a teen center in Ann Arbor, Michigan, says that though the Neutral Zone started out as a tutoring and after-school drop-in center, the recording studio and concert programs, which developed later, now draw in more young folks than any other programs. It also shows the importance of music that a lot of companies, military recruiters, and religious institutions throw piles of money around to be associated with a music show or festival. They, too, are trying to meet young people where they're at (in order to sell them stuff or ideas, of course) by sponsoring an experience that is known to be culturally relevant to youth. Each of these groups recognizes the important role of music in our lives.

While all of the organizations profiled in this book are tied to music, many groups are doing much more. Some started as literacy programs. Many run art galleries, silk-screen studios, zine libraries, darkrooms, or tiny cinemas. Most are trying to make the most of the space they have to bring people of all ages together to have cultural experiences that are unique to their communities, and challenge audiences to think differently, whether about art, about politics, or about identity and culture.

There's a multitude of other organizations that provide this kind of space but focus mainly on media, poetry and writing, community organizing, bike building, urban farming, skate and snowboarding, or theater production. By focusing on music, we wanted to take a snapshot of one part of that multimedia, multifaceted independent cultural movement, encourage its growth, and help link folks to those working on other parts of it.

## THE PROCESS

This book is the culmination of years of getting to understand and know youth music spaces, during which time I had the opportunity to reflect on Vera's evolution, the good and bad decisions we made, and how other people have done it differently. Most of the information is based on a two-year national survey of any and every community all-ages music organization in the United States. I could find using the internet; my experience booking tours; and networking with friends and contacts in bands and the

music industry. Out of the first 125 organizations I encountered, 60 completed in-depth surveys or interviews. I was able to actually visit 20 organizations and see them in action. Additionally, I reached out to all these folks for source material to draw out the resources that exist in shoe boxes, file cabinets, zine libraries, and notes transferred from whiteboards onto the backs of flyers. Because Vera is my most familiar point of reference, you will hear a lot about it in comparison to other equally important organizations featured in this book.

**Coauthors and Contributors**

Any part of the book that is not attributed to someone was written by me. The most important part of this project, however, was the substantial participation of 14 organizations from different communities. Nine different organizational representatives visited and documented the work of peer organizations and cowrote this book.

Each chapter focuses on a different topic, such as putting on shows or organizational structure, and for each topic we looked at a particular organization that has success in that area. At the end of each chapter, there is a "spotlight" section that represents an exchange between organizations — again, where folks from one organization were sent to another to write up what you see in this book. Sort of like having one band write a review about another, only with organizations instead of bands.

Gavin, Kameron, Katy, Diaris, Chris, Kevin, Britt, and Lori all work in different communities ranging from Anacortes, Washington, to New Orleans, Louisiana. They each bring years of experience and unique perspectives to their writing. We chose to spotlight organizations spotlighted based on their history, geography, unique story, or best practice, and their ability to take time to communicate with us. They represent different facets of community all-ages and youth music organizations, but, admittedly, there are big gaps.

**What's the Scope?**

The scope of providing youth access to music is much larger than venues that put on all-ages shows. When I went looking for all-ages music organizations, I searched for groups in roughly the following categories:

- *Underground or DIY Organizations.* These organizations are focused on the more subversive side of local music scenes. Even if they are not punk venues per se, they tend

to have some sort of punk orientation. By this I mean a commitment to do-it-yourself, do it outside of "the system," do it through collective leadership, and to do it for no monetary gain. They typically serve lesser-known music and art forms; foster lots of cross-media collaboration — between visual art and music; and branch out into serving food, hosting classes, and holding community meetings. They may aim to be multigenre and diverse, but they often cater to a small, close-knit underground community.

- *Teen Centers with Music Programming*. These organizations are about youth opportunities more than anything. They tend to be the only building in town where teens are really welcomed and valued. Staff and volunteers are regularly trained in youth development, and there are always teen performers and probably an annual Battle of the Bands.
- *Music Nonprofits*. These organizations focus on one genre (think hip-hop after-school programs and girls rock camps). They host classes and use music's intersection with other things to touch on community and youth-development issues. Their classes are mostly free or have very nominal fees. They tend to be led by musicians and artists who came to youth work almost by accident. These organizations rarely have their own space and, rather, partner up with the other two types, public schools, and community centers.

Even as I looked for these organizations and groups, I knew that all organizations have some aspect of the others or flow in and out of each category depending on who's at the helm. Organizations within each of these categories can be really serious about art or not that serious about art, really into politics and social causes or indifferent to them, and/or led by people who think about what they are doing as a career or as a hobby.

Some organizations, such as the Neutral Zone, started out of parent-teen collaborations and have the benefit of well-trained staff and interns graduating from the community and youth organizing program at the University of Michigan, the leading school in academic thought in the field. Others, such as ABC No Rio in New York City and AS220 in Providence, Rhode Island, were started by a handful of idealistic young people who claimed a little commercial space for emerging artists; they intuitively understood the importance of a community arts space but had little knowledge or interest in the nonprofit runaround. Elementz, in Cincinnati, Ohio, is explicitly aiming to build political power in overlooked communities by providing a spectrum of youth opportunities, starting with the Hip Hop Youth Arts Center.

## WHY WRITE A BOOK?

Though the differences in our organizations, communities, and experiences are great, there are some things we have in common:

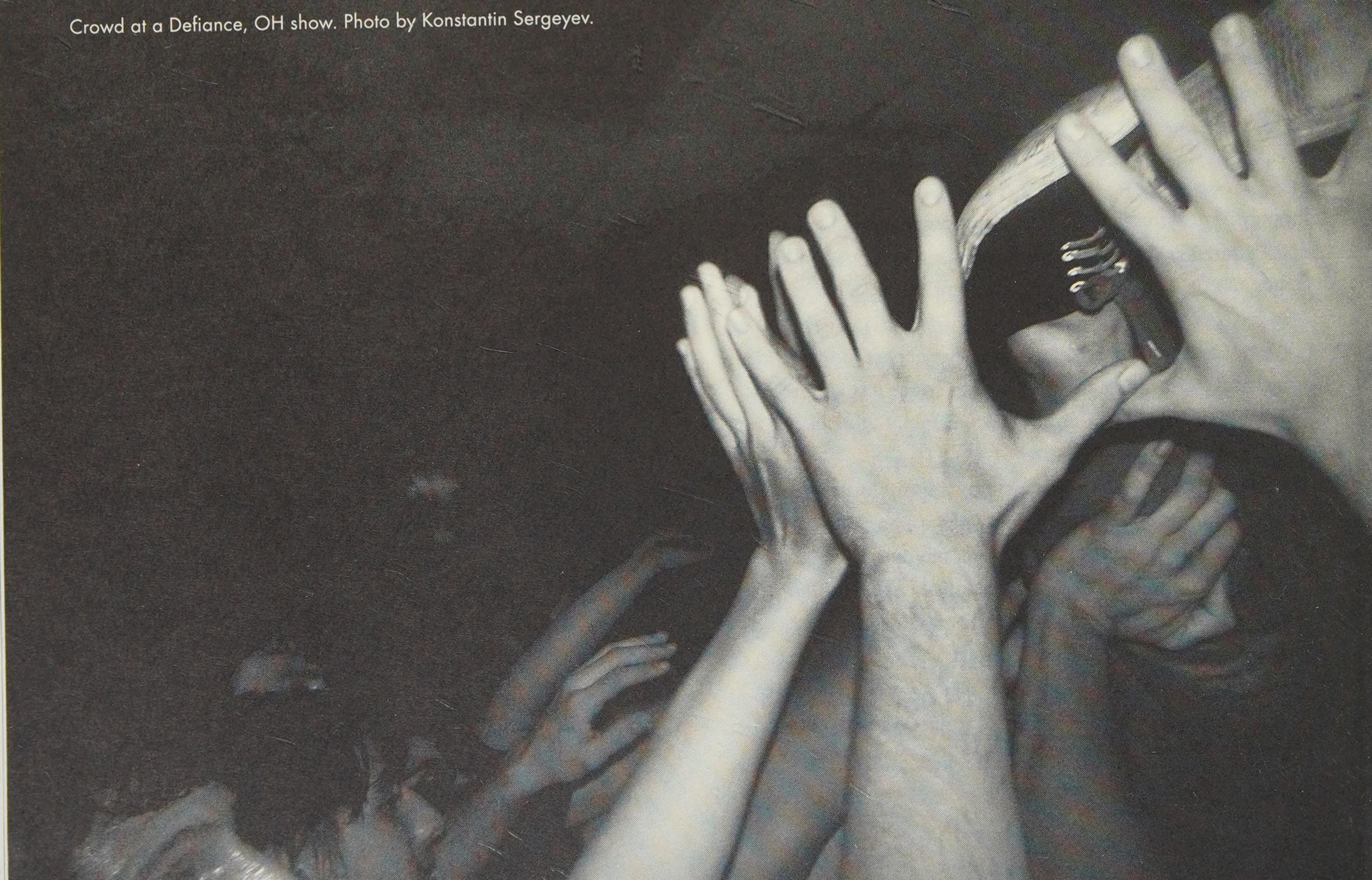
- We believe youth everywhere deserve access to live music, the tools for artistic creation, and the space to explore and define their identities and build community without corporate marketing involved.
- We believe in creating spaces that are not just for young people, but are owned and run by them, too.
- We see independent music organizations as public platforms for raising awareness and artistic experimentation.
- We encourage participatory decision-making and building bridges across cultural divides.
- We build cohesion and power within our communities by meeting people where they're at and having high expectations for what's possible.
- We're trying to model within our organizations what we want to see in the rest of the world.
- We've had some successes and challenges. We learn a lot from screwing up, getting harshly critiqued from inside and out, and talking to each other.

Most importantly, we are often asked for advice and guidance by others starting similar project. This book is one attempt to facilitate that process. As a group, we wanted to make it easier for individuals and groups to find the information they need regardless of where they are and whom they know. To hear more about why we think this kind of work is important, please turn the page.

Your *vere et recte amica,*

**Shannon Stewart**

Crowd at a Defiance, OH show. Photo by Konstantin Sergeyev.



# IN EVERY TOWN

# AN ALL-AGES MUSIC MANUALFESTO

# LET EVERYONE IN.

by KIMYA DAWSON

Gilman, 1919 Hemphill, the Unitarian Church in Philly, R5 Productions, Sluggos, the Bike Barn, the Trunk Space, and backyards, living rooms, practice spaces, and planetariums turned into music venues — these are my favorite places to play music. They're all off-the-radar all-ages places people have set up for musicians like me to play in.

Why do I play mostly all-ages shows? First off, it seems fucked-up to me for any sort of event to exclude anybody. Not that it's the same as segregation by race or gender — but it kind of is. I don't want anybody to ever feel like they can't go to something that they want to go to. A world where people want to do something and other people are like, "You can't do it," for whatever reason, has never made sense to me.

Second, in my experience, young people are more attentive and respectful at shows than other people. People ask me, "Why do you want to

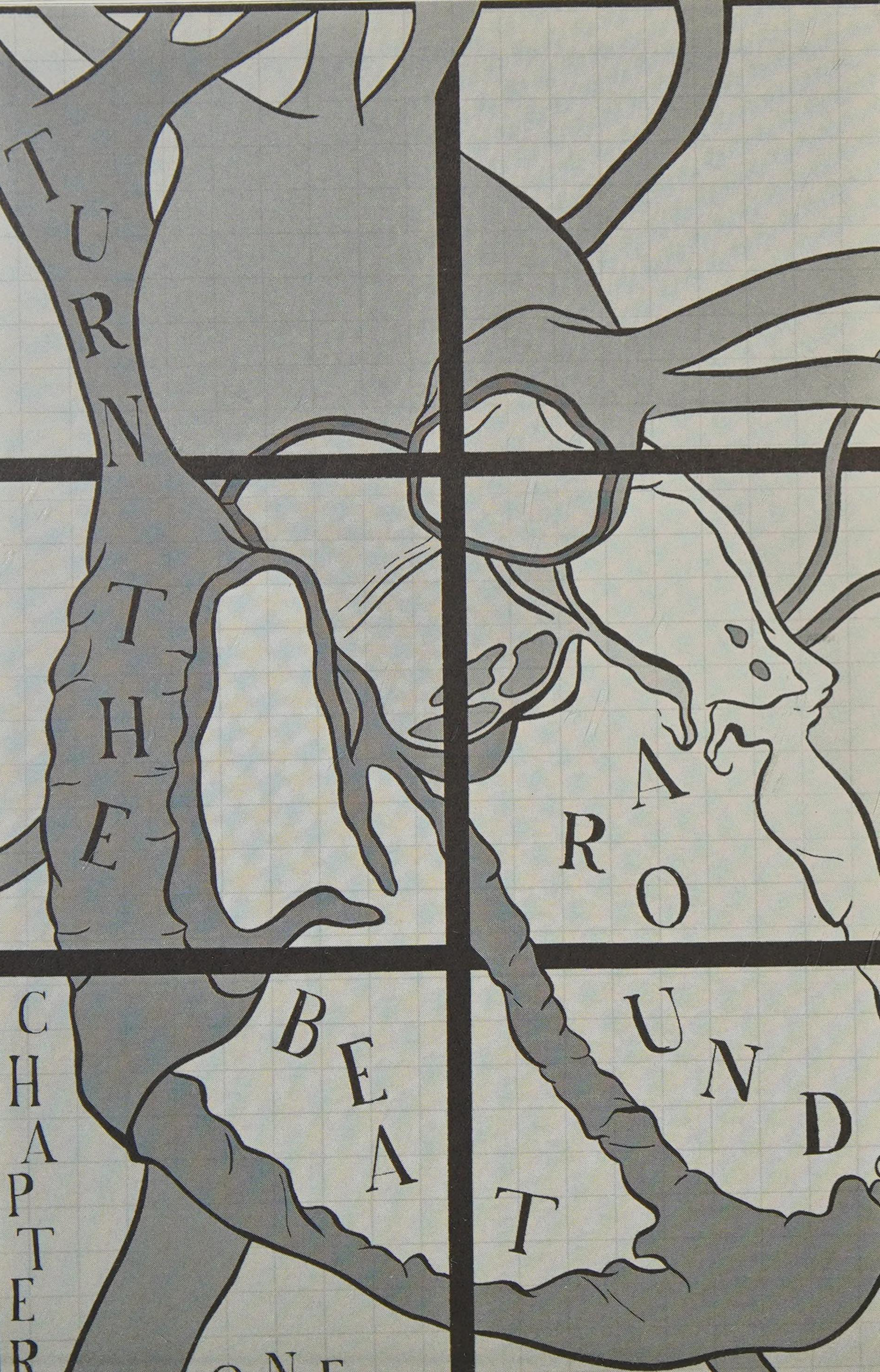
play for kids? Why do you want to have a bunch of crazy kids at your shows? They're so annoying!" And I'm like, "No, you and your buddies sitting at the bar, talking and having a beer while I'm trying to play, are annoying." Young people are happy to be there and grateful to be a part of something.

Also, community music spaces just feel different. I feel more welcome and I trust that it's going to be a good show when people are volunteering to work the event or put it on. I know people want to be there — that it's not just a job to them. This is especially important to me now that I'm touring as a mom and I have to be even stricter about the environments I play in. I need to be even more aware of the safety of a place. Take 924 Gilman in Berkeley, for instance: it has so much youth and rebelliousness to it, but still, it's one of the most strict and tightly run places I've ever been. People on the outside don't realize how much dedication it takes to run a space, how much work goes into it. They judge it by what it looks like and where the entrance is.

When I get emails from kids that say, "We don't have any good place for shows around here," I say, "What about your backyard? What about your house?" I've played in people's living rooms with four of their friends.

You can have fun with ten people. You can have fun with yourself. You can do this for yourself. So, start small. Be open-minded. Don't be judgmental. Let everyone in.

Don't get discouraged if you work on a show and people don't come. That just happens sometimes. Just do it again.


TURN THE BEAT AROUND
CHAPTER ONE

CHAPTER ONE

# TURN THE BEAT AROUND

Artwork • Wade Liostro

*One, everybody clear your mind and take a breath*
*Two, everybody wipe your eyes and take a step*
*Three, everybody look all ways, but trust yourself*
*Four, everybody know the way you know yourself*
*Five, everybody lose the map and lose the plan*
*Six, everybody rediscover understand*
*Seven, everybody see yourself when you come in*
*Eight, everybody turn around and start again*

---

The Evens • "Minding One's Business"

During his testimony in front of Washington, D.C., City Council in January 2007, Ian MacKaye said, "Music is for all people. Music is no joke. It's a form of communication that predates language." Ian, singer and guitarist of Fugazi and the Evens, addressed the council when, following a tragic shooting at a local 18-and-up nightclub, panicked legislators proposed an ordinance that would nearly ban live music by and for people under 21. This in the city where one of the most historically important music scenes sparked a pro-youth music movement nationally and internationally. Ian explained:

> I come from a community of musicians who have worked for twenty-five years, responsibly. We've provided music

> for people of all ages. I'm not talking about [audiences] 18 and up, I'm talking about [audiences] 10, 9, and up; it doesn't make a difference, because in our community, people have looked after each other and we have really tried to make music accessible.

With characteristic intensity, Ian slammed his fist on the table in front of him. "Teenagers are human beings. To treat them like they are only fodder for either predators or businesspeople is nuts." His expression changed as his time ran out. "Thanks for your time," he said in a neutral tone, and sat back in his chair.

That same month, five years after the overturning of the Teen Dance Ordinance in Seattle, Washington — which had eliminated all-ages shows between 1985 and 2002 — and with the scene bursting with new all-ages spaces, artists, organizers and promoters, Chris Hong, a local Seattle musician and sound engineer, addressed a crowd. This one was gathered for a more uplifting purpose: to raise money to help the Vera Project, one of Seattle's youth-run all-ages venues, renovate a long-term home. "Vera is not just a music venue. We are not a rec center, and we are certainly not babysitters," Chris said emphatically. "We are a diverse community that is working at the grassroots to create consensus and credible social change [through music]. We are battling everything in our culture that seeks to make us boring, apathetic, and stupid. We are a community inspired and defined by our affinities and connections to each other, not by how marginalized we are from the rest of society." While the atmosphere was hopeful, still-bitter memories of the ordinance that, by 1999, had wiped out an entire all-ages scene only a few years after Seattle was the center of the music universe lurked in the corners of many minds.

Here too, was an incredibly vibrant, hopeful, independent scene fighting like hell to keep itself alive financially while defending itself against threats of termination on many fronts. Undoubtedly, many all-ages music communities in between the Washingtons have been through this.

Now, fast-forward to the compilation and release of this book.

- This book is here as proof that young people from Seattle, Washington, to Washington, D.C., and everywhere in between are creative, smart, organized, and getting things done.
- This book is here to address and confront the forces that

make it hard for independent music and art spaces to stay afloat.

- This book is about commitments and long-term relationships.
- It's a self-help book.
- It's a rant about how screwed up things are.
- It's s a book about optimistic music fans.
- It's a history of little-known buildings.
- It's a survival guide.

●

## WHAT'S IN YOUR HANDS

"Grassroots," "do-it-yourself," "empowerment," "agency," "independent," "guerrilla," "underground."

These are words that describe the actions of regular people achieving things we're often told are beyond our reach or out of our control.

A lot of people desire to have a great youth program, a community space, and accessible music resources. It is something else altogether to get serious about making it happen.

It's in *your* hands. You don't need to wait for someone else to create opportunities for you and your community. It's up to regular people like us to do this stuff, and if we don't, other people with less honorable intentions — like big corporations, media conglomerates, and megachurches — will do it first.

So, that said, it's in your hands. This book is a snippet of what's going on with youth music organizations in the United States, and a compilation of the knowledge and experiences that have gotten the all-ages movement to where it is. Getting serious about taking action also means thinking seriously about what you're trying to do, how it serves your community, and who should be on your team. This book doesn't have all the answers, but it asks the hard questions you have to think about in order to build organizations that are useful, respected, and lasting.

Because this book covers a lot of different organizations, in different communities, using different genres and mediums, it's a given that you are not going to identify with all the language or philosophies presented. If you're a punk, emcee, or organizer worth your weight in vinyl, you'll critique these ideas and models, find the pieces that work for you, and eventually write the next book.

●

## LET THE MEETING BEGIN

This book has seven chapters that focus on certain logistical aspects of starting and maintaining a youth music program and all-ages space. Each one starts with explanations and straightforward how-to advice written and compiled by me (Shannon), and ends with one or two organizational case studies written by different youth music organizers. The case studies give an overview of the organizations and the climates they exist within, focusing on the chapter topic at hand. The final chapter is a jointly written essay about how we see our work connected to social and cultural change. Throughout all of the stories, there are the following parameters and themes:

### Agenda Item #1: Youth

When the writers refer to "youth" or "young people," we are talking about people entering young adulthood, between the ages of 14 and 24. Because the legal drinking age is the biggest barrier to youth's access to live music and consistent social-gathering places, the segment of the population in the most need is under 21. Beyond legal barriers to entry, there are many other factors that affect access to cultural communities for young adults.

As you will see, organizations choose to tackle the issue of pervasive adultism and age segregation from very different angles. In Chapter 2, the piece "When Teens Rule the Game," by Gavin Leonard, looks at the renowned teen-run community center the Neutral Zone in Ann Arbor, Michigan, and explains how an adult-staffed organization does innovative work on youth leadership. Even organizations that don't focus as intensely on youth leadership can learn much from their point of view and success in creating age-integrated youth-led space.

### Agenda Item #2: Franchises vs. Models

Community organizations are uniquely built to serve their locales and are shaped by their founders. As writers of this book representing very different organizations, we know it would be impossible for one kind of organization to serve a variety of communities with diverse populations, differing economic resources, and locally influenced music scenes. Even amazing organizations and movements worth replicating in different places need to be relevant to their surroundings. Similarly, people decide to start all-ages spaces and music programs for different reasons, bringing with them

their unique orientations as artists, promoters, community organizers, social workers, students, and/or concerned parents. For that reason, the organizations in this book are diverse on purpose.

In her piece on Batey Urbano (Chapter 7, "Players"), Diaris Alexander looks at how integrated the organization's work is with its neighborhood's nonprofit institutions, schools, and businesses — and how Batey's relationships with these other groups are key to survival. Within a year of the organization's establishment as a center for culture and organizing among young people in its Puerto Rican community, the model immediately resonated with other tightly knit black and Latino neighborhoods, first in Chicago, then elsewhere in the country, resulting in the creation of several other Urbanos.

The 924 Gilman Street Project is the organization that many punk-oriented all-ages spaces claim as a reference point for what they do. In Chapter 3, "Democratize It Yourself," I look specifically at how parts of Gilman's membership and organizational structure are can be replicated in other places.

While looking at organizations in different regions of the country made up of different kinds of folks, the writers distilled some of the universal truths that were demonstrated over and over again. We aren't saying these organizations are perfect or without issues. The point is to learn both from their successes and their challenges.

**Agenda Item #3: To Be Legit or Not**

Despite all the things that seem different about the organizations in this book, one thing is the same, and it is an important point when talking about mostly underground music and art organizations: they are committed to staying afloat and to being, for the most part, legal.

And so it goes that the ideas and tools presented in this book are focused on the legal side of sustaining an organization. We chose to do this not to make any sort of statement against doing things in a more under-the-radar way — in basements, kitchens, and illegal gallery spaces and warehouses. (Underground music gatherings are hugely important both for the sake of artistic experimentation and community building.)

By focusing on legal, aboveground organizations, we are hoping to demystify some of the less sexy, glamorous, or talked-about aspects of engaging in music promotion and production: the laws, permits, regulations, and social issues that get in the way of people being able to come together and share music

freely. Though many of the organizations here have an underground or radical orientation, they have intentionally decided to go the route of legitimacy. The question of how legal to be (or appear to be) is examined throughout.

Youth Movement Records in Oakland, California, illustrates how operating legally can meet certain progressive ends. To understand the full impact of organizations like YMR that blend record production with youth development in the San Francisco Bay Area, you would need to ride the BART train and witness how record production has begun to replace other, less positive street economies, as young people are selling their self-produced CDs to fellow train riders. Building on this underground trade, YMR ups the artist development ante, teaching dozens of classes, putting out professional-level compilations, connecting young artists to national touring opportunities and record publishing deals, while alumni are running community programs in juvenile hall. Now living in New Orleans, YMR alumna and recording artist Kameron Moore-Mitchell, aka the SeKond Element, tells the story of what it was like to be a young person involved in YMR from the beginning and how it has affected her. She explains the pedagogy of YMR leaders and what it was like to work with a group of her peers to make and release their first compilation album, "The Movement."

In another corner of the country, after years of toil, the all-ages music and art space Cave 9 in Birmingham, Alabama, filed its papers for official nonprofit status only to be hit with a governmental sucker punch: a $6,000 tax bill from the state. Having played at Cave 9 with one of her bands, Katy Otto revisits the organization and documents their stripped-down methods of providing an all-ages music space in such a sincere way that it has put the city on the indie touring map.

**Agenda Item #4: "Opera House = Punk House"**

This is a theme about the importance of real, physical space. During the writing of this book, a coordinated movement called the Right to the City was officially launched at the 2007 U.S. Social Forum. The Right to the City presents a large-scale international call to reclaim land and resources for all people. While community music venues are a little corner of what a more humanely built environment could include, they represent existing examples of this ideology. Music is for everyone. Space to come together around music is for everyone. Space to feel safe, welcomed, acknowledged, valuable, and creative is a right of everyone.

Building off of this idea and the question of whether being legit is "selling out" by punk standards, in the Chapter 5 piece "With and Without Walls," Kevin Erickson addresses the quiet radicalism of sticking it out as a DIY space and what that means for cultural change. Representing an organization straddling the line of legality, Kevin visits and then retells the story of ABC No Rio in New York City, an organization that went up against its landlord (the city itself) and successfully reclaimed its building in the Lower East Side of Manhattan for community resources and art.

In a slightly less confrontational example, in Chapter 7 Britt Curtis narrates the story of the Vera Project's alliance building with the City of Seattle, and how Vera was able to make the case that it's the city's duty to provide a music space for young people. As Vera founders used to say, "Opera House = Punk House."

Finally, taking this idea to a whole new level, it could be said that AS220 in Providence, Rhode Island is working for the right of artists to actually own an entire city. In Chris Wiltsee's piece "Unjuried, Uncensored, Always All-Ages," he visits Providence to hook up with the Rhode Show crew, a hip-hop recording and performance program under the direction of David Gonzales at AS220, and stumbles upon evidence that the community arts organization is taking over downtown, modeling more sustainable development with their ownership of three (and counting) enormous performance/live/work buildings.

**Agenda Item #5: Closing the Distance**

When the founders of Elementz: The Hip Hop Youth Arts Center in Cincinnati, Ohio, reached out to David DeForest-Stalls in Denver, Colorado, for help, they received it. In the final case study of this book, Lori Roddy highlights how organizations can and should use each other as resources. One organization is not the right model for every place, but Elementz organizers saw something in the Spot in Denver that they immediately connected to. The Spot's model allowed the founders of Elementz to back up their ideas with tools and begin to transform a pattern of youth and police violence in their city into community power and police accountability.

With Elementz and the Spot as a collaborative inspiration, this book represents a collection of exchanges between people piecing together our collective history. In doing this, we acknowledge that within every community organization, the histories and experiences are complex; the perspectives on

successes and challenges are constantly oscillating and contradicting one another. So much ground has been covered, so many people have burnt out or left to start new organizations, and so many others have stuck it out for decades. It is a major undertaking, and we didn't even get to the part where we give proper homage to the musicians that helped to shape these scenes (luckily, those books are more likely to already exist or be written in the future). Knowing this, we decided to focus on taking a snapshot, and, most important, to start talking to one another.

Each bit of documentation was done through conversation among the writers and featured organizations, down to the last essay, "What Does the 'Movement' in All-Ages Movement Project Mean?" This essay represents a two-hour conversation in which we talked about the theme of music's presence in movements for social and cultural change as it applied to our various communities. For some people, the social change connection is built into why the organization exists in the first place. Others of us started intuitively, and through time and experience began to understand that this work does not and cannot exist in a vacuum, separate from an understanding of the conditions that determine who does and does not get space, who does and does not get record deals, who does and does not get harassed by cops or legislated against. And, knowing that, we decided we cannot exist in isolation from one another.

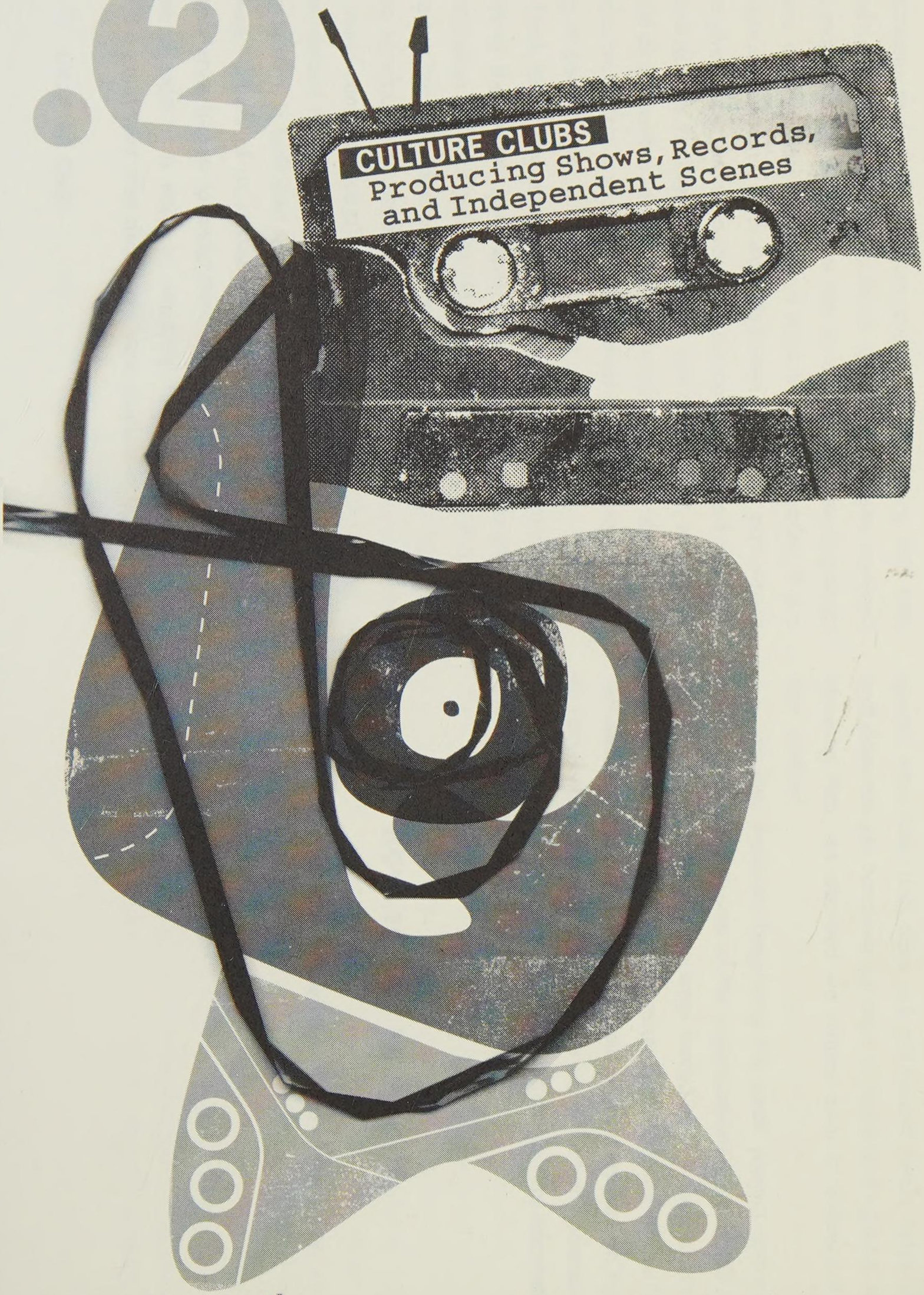
In the time between beginning this book project and sending it to the printer, some of the organizations we profiled had huge victories, while others were forced to shut their doors for good. This speaks to the dynamism and volatility of the field, as well as the real challenges music organizers face in trying to carve out sustainable spaces. To us, it further underscores the urgent need to work together. The most current information can always be found at allages.net.

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## HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

Use your imagination, and please invite us to the party.

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CULTURE CLUBS
Producing Shows, Records,
and Independent Scenes

magnetic

CHAPTER TWO

# CULTURE CLUBS

## Producing Shows , Records, and Independent Scenes

*Creating our own outlets even if it ain't out yet / Seeing typical trends through a critical lens / Making media, music, so you have no influence / Mobilizing a movement so your brainwashing is useless*

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Playing or listening to music can be formative, transformative, eye-opening, galvanizing, and inspiring. "It changes lives. Live music changes lives," Melissa Quayle said in an interview for the Seattle Channel when she first started working at the Vera Project. Experiencing live music can change the lives of both artists and audience members. Going to the same kinds of shows, at certain kinds of venues, with roughly the same people who share a common interest in sound, creates community and a culture within it.

"Culture" is a notoriously messy concept, a clumsy catch all that includes arts, institutions, and beliefs. One way to wrap your head around it is to think about how culture is produced. Shows, records, and festivals are examples of cultural production. How they are put on or put out, who is presented, how much they cost, where the money goes, and how they are publicized and distributed involve a series of creative choices, all components of cultural production that shape people's experience and, over time, can influence the culture of a community or scene. Who makes what you love? How do you respond to it?

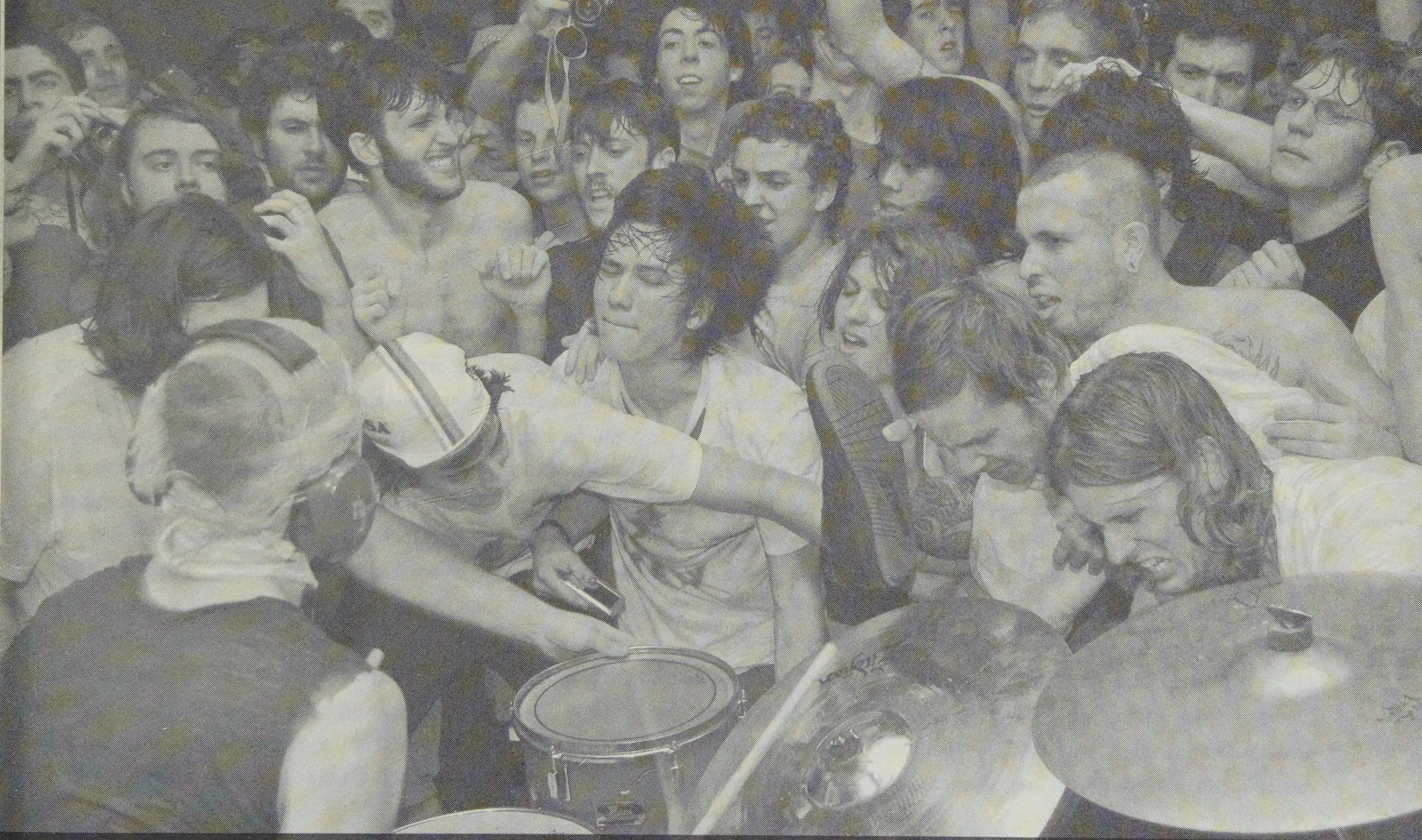
Remember what Ian MacKaye said in the previous chapter about his band Fugazi, and how artists affect culture with the choices they

Artwork • George Estrada

make about production. Fugazi was committed to playing only all-ages spaces, charging a $5 cover at each show, and putting out their own records. These choices influenced millions of young people to value and actively seek out music that is produced independently. Here are some more examples of artists who've shaped independent scenes.

- **Kathleen Hanna** from Bikini Kill and Le Tigre has spent much of her career carving out space for women, queer people, and feminism in the punk and indie music scenes. She was critical in shaping the riot grrl movement through the content and production of her music (releasing on all-female labels), zine writing, and building relationships with her fans.
- **Jenny Toomey** from Tsunami contributed immeasurably to the Washington, D.C., all-ages punk scene with Simple Machines, the record label she cofounded, and by helping to start Positive Force DC (one of the oldest all-ages political punk collectives). She later founded the Future of Music Coalition, a think tank and lobbying group that advocates for a more democratic and decentralized landscape for musicians to work within.
- **Chuck D** is best known for being an emcee in Public Enemy while being outspoken about the degradation of rap into a solely commercial enterprise. He has started independent hip-hop websites that stream music and videos. He has also written an autobiography and continues to be politically outspoken.
- **Sarah Jones** is a spoken-word artist whose song/poem "Your Revolution," about calling out the hypocrisy of hyper masculinity and radicalism in hip hop, was temporarily banned by the FCC for indecency. Amidst the controversy, Jones's work has consistently received critical acclaim, and she has been repeatedly commissioned by human rights organizations and foundations to create original work.
- **Calvin Johnson** founded K Records in 1982 and has since released some of the Northwest's best independent artists. With his band, Beat Happening, Calvin toured small towns, sometimes deliberately avoiding major markets. These days he tours the United States by train.
- **Ghost Mice** is a folk-punk duo from Bloomington, Indiana, that releases all their albums on one member's label, Plan-It-X records. It's a small label that equates DIY with being socially and politically aware.

These artists and countless others understand that choices



Lightning Bolt at 600 Bushwick Avenue, Brooklyn, NYC. Photo by Jason Bergman.

about how their work is produced, manufactured, publicized, and distributed transmit a set of values, just as much as any lyrical or artistic content. These are just a few of the many past and current examples of independent cultural production.

These examples also illustrate the importance of the independent infrastructure that must exist to support independent and emerging artists: things like venues, labels, studios, websites, zines and magazines, and radio stations. Knowing how to put on shows or put out records — and to be able to do it well, resourcefully, while working with lots of different people and creating good vibes — is a powerful thing. People doing this on their own constantly get to learn new things, while intervening and reworking the dominant music-production methods to create new and interesting music scenes.

All-ages music organizations play big roles in defining the look, feel, and sound of a music scene. Take a venue like the Smell in Los Angeles, for example. Some people hear that name and immediately think about artists such as No Age, Abe Vigoda, BARR, and Mika Miko; publications such as *ANP Quarterly;* deceased venues like Jabberjaw; and more general themes like homegrown labels in the backyard of the recording industry, tight-knit music scenes, experimental punk, all-volunteer spaces, and the promise of all-ages music opportunities. The small creative choices involved in having a venue and putting on shows have wide-ranging ripple effects, especially in conjunction with all the other complementary infrastructural parts. There are examples like this in every region, where a small network of independent spaces or organizations has created an entirely new sound in hip-hop, punk, rock, or experimental music.

While many groups play a part in creating and maintaining independent music scenes, this book is primarily about all-ages organizations that put on shows and give people tools to write and release their own music. Before we really get into how these organizations function, we'll look at what they are actually doing — i.e., producing shows and records independently — and why. If you're already knowledgeable in these areas, you might want to skip ahead to the next section.

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## THE DIY WAY VS. THE INDUSTRY WAY

Most people put on their first show or put out their first record because they themselves or their friends are musicians, and no

one else is offering to do it for them. So, they do it themselves.

Shows can be big and fancy and require a year of planning, or they can be thrown together in an afternoon. To put one on, you simply need to decide who's going to play and where it will be. You make sure you have a sound system and someone who can run it; then you decide how much, if anything, it will cost, and start promoting it.

Records take more time and can be a little more technically involved, but many of the same decisions and steps apply. You decide which artist(s) will be on the record, who can record them, with what equipment, where, and when. You also need to design the cover art, plan a release event, and promote it.

In either case, the bigger and more professional you want the production to be in either case, the more money and people are involved. Without a big budget and commercial interest, how do you make this work?

The majors in the music industry give one model for music production to emulate: labels sign popular artists, who go on tour, playing in bars and festivals, and their songs get licensed for commercial use, which hopefully supports musicians over time. This is mostly a financial model in which only a tiny fraction of artists, venues, or labels will actually make it because the limitations of the structure are so numerous. For instance, it's hard to reach people under 21 in this model, because most shows aren't all-ages. For people who aren't writing poppy hooks that can sell cars, it also won't work. For people without a middle-class background and financial security net to pay their bills while they get their band off the ground, or to save their ass if it doesn't pay off, it's really challenging. And for people who find the atmosphere of music clubs and the industry in general to be unattractive, unhealthy, or unsafe, it really sucks. The culture created by this model of production is about popularity, who you know, scarcity, competition, high stakes, trendy sounds, and a narrowing of people's taste in music. And, as of late, this model is caving in on itself.

For more people to have music opportunities that are interesting and diverse, individuals and communities have to take things into our own hands. There have to be challenges to the industry model, as well as entirely different models altogether. This means finding and making ways for people without economic resources to have access to instruction and equipment, places for young people to plug in, and ways that musicians can be inspired and fulfilled whether or not the royalties are rolling in.

In being part of nurturing a scene that isn't playing the industry

game, you have stylistic choices to make, along with program choices that turn music production into a process for encouraging openness, experimentation, reinvigoration, and community building — all the things it was meant to be before it was turned into a product for mass consumption.

Some questions about how to engender a different kind of vibe in your local music scene require a lot of consideration. What sort of feel do you want your records and shows to project? How do you make a music space safe and engaging for young people, people of color, queer people, and women? These larger aesthetic and ideological questions intersect with the smaller, more concrete ones, such as: What kind of outreach and advertising should you do? How much should you charge? Who should you book in a show or put on a record?

But first, the *how*.

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## NUTS AND BOLTS OF PRODUCING MUSIC INDEPENDENTLY

Getting different people together with something to add to a music project is one way that music production depends on building community. For example, to put on shows, in addition to musicians you need people in the following roles:

- *Booker/Promoter.* Someone to organize the show and make sure the word gets out.
- *Live Sound Engineer.* Someone who knows how to set up the gear and run a sound system.
- *Stage Manager.* The person who makes sure the show runs on time.
- *Poster/Flyer Designer.* The crafty person who makes promotion more effective.
- *Other Event Staff.* Extra people to help with selling tickets, lighting, security, and cleanup.
- *Audience Members.* Hopefully, lots of them!

To put out records, you need:

- *Engineers.* The people who know how to turn knobs, isolate instruments, and make it all come together on a track.
- *Cover Art Designer.* Someone to visually entice people to buy the record.
- *Publicist.* Someone to try to get the record reviewed and to

help get the word out about the release event.
- *Event-Organizing Folks.* The people on the above list.
- *Listeners and Audience Members.*

Of course, you can wear many of these hats yourself and do the tasks in a low-key way (i.e., you don't have to have a publicist to copy CDs on your computer and give them out to your friends). Also, in many small, independent projects, the people involved are wearing multiple hats because they've learned a little bit about many aspects of music production. Because so many people working with music are not making big money anyway, you can usually find someone who is psyched to help out with DIY and community-oriented projects.

Space-wise, you can put on shows and record music anywhere that noise can be tolerated and controlled. Tolerated by the people surrounding you (like your neighbors), and controlled so that a recording or show will sound as good as possible without a lot of background noise. Some rooms have better acoustics for live and recorded music, but if you're just getting going, having a space at all is the biggest criteria. Lots of people record their records and put on shows at home. Other spots include churches, galleries, parks, community centers, libraries, and of course, music venues themselves. This is discussed in more detail in Chapter 5.

For the sake of giving a more detailed example, we'll walk through the steps of event planning for a daylong community music festival. Many of the organizations in this book produce at least one community festival a year, if not more, and many start out as festivals that grow into year-round organizations. PDX Pop Now!, for example, is an organization that started off as a string of free all-ages shows in Portland, and has grown to include youth outreach and educational programming in public schools at different points throughout the year. Looking at a larger-scale production like a festival can shed light on the intricacies of smaller ones. The two case studies at the end of the chapter will offer a better look at the specifics of production in community-run venues and record labels.

## EVENT PLANNING 101: PUTTING ON A COMMUNITY FESTIVAL

### What's the Point?

Before you jump into a project like planning a festival, first

you'll need to articulate why you want to do it and what you're hoping to accomplish. Doing so will make your event more effective, make it easier for you to pull other people in, and remind you what motivated you when things get hectic. Do you want to support local musicians? Do you want to have a benefit or raise awareness about something? Do you want to give bored young people something fun and interesting to be a part of? Do you want to set something up for all the touring bands that are coming through?

**Group Strategy and Communication**

Next, you'll want to figure out who's going to work on what and how they'll communicate with one another. Do you have everyone you need to get the job done? What is the best way to communicate (for example, weekly meetings and an email list)?

If you have enough people involved to subdivide, it can be really helpful to break up into different committees like booking/programming, sponsorship, promotion, and production. As more people are pulled into the process — artists, staff, venue contacts, etc. — keeping everyone in the loop is key.

**Budget**

Almost everything takes money. You have to figure out how you're going to pay for stuff: ticket sales? Sponsorships? In-kind donations? Out of your own pockets? Brainstorm a list of possible expenses, such as:

- Space rental
- Liability insurance
- Artist fees
- Sound equipment
- Sound engineer(s)
- Flyer design
- Printing
- Snacks and water for performers and volunteers
- Permits

Then think of possible ways you can generate income or get donations, such as:

- Ticket sales
- Sponsorships and partnerships
- Donations

- Raffles
- Concessions
- Merchandise
- Vendor fees (charging people to have a table or booth at your event)

**Date and Time**

You should check and see what other festivals or events are going on that might be geared toward the crowd you're trying to attract. If you want young people to come, the event should wrap up at a reasonable hour.

**Booking Events and Working with Artists**

The usual logic to making a lineup for a show is that you have the artist with the biggest audience play last, and book supporting acts that are similar or have crossover appeal. How far you can stretch the audience's attention span really depends on the crowd. Sometimes you can go from a breakdance troupe to an indie rock band to an emcee, and sometimes you can't even put two singer-songwriters next to one another without having half the audience walk away. This is something you can kind of intuit and learn through experience. Festivals provide an opportunity to try to bring in different audiences through having multiple stages and many hours of programming.

The process of booking artists usually follows these steps:

- Researching artists of interest
- Checking their availability
- Making them offers
- Comfirming them
- Agreeing on the details
- Sending the the show information in advance

This is sort of a formal way of saying you have to think about who could play, find out if they're busy or not, ask them to play, and make sure they know the when, where why, and how. If you working with someone you know, this usually happens in the course of one conversation or email exchange and doesn't have to be super formal. If you're working with artists whom you're less familiar with, it's good to be as clear about expectations as possible. When you want to work with musicians who have agents or managers working for them, some lingo comes into play:

# BOOKING VERNACULAR

A **TALENT BUYER** (presumably you) is usually also the **PROMOTER**. This person reaches out to a band or artist's **BOOKING AGENT** – the person who coordinates and negotiates what shows bands play and takes a cut of their payment. When you're starting to book a show or festival, you first want to check the availability of a bunch of different artists. Once you decide which of those artists you'd like to pursue and have found out if they're available or not, you'll be expected to submit an offer. An **OFFER** specifies the date, time, set length, other artists, and what you are offering to pay the performers.

Payments are made in either **DOOR SPLITS** (where you agree to pay a percentage of the income from ticket sales — "the door") or **GUARANTEES** (where you agree to pay the artist a flat fee no matter what the door receipts are). Most small venues use door splits, to many agents' dismay. In a situation where two promoters are making offers, the agent will almost always go with the person offering a guarantee over a door split, so that you carry the financial responsibility. This thinking is supposed to create some sort of incentive for doing good promotion, which is understandable, but unfortunately agents usually overshoot the artist's true popularity (it's sort of their job to) and don't take into account all the other factors that help to decide why people go to a show on any given night. In big event booking, you're usually negotiating a guarantee and a split of anything extra that is made. At most nightclubs, liquor sales balance the financial risk.

Agents will submit a **CONTRACT**[1] for you to sign that repeats the terms of the offer, along with a lot of legal lingo, references to acts of God and whatnot. Pay attention to things like payment methods (cash or checks, whether you have to make a deposit in advance) and the exact spelling and capitalization of the band name to be used in the billing or publicity.

Contracts generally come with a rider attached. A **RIDER** is a list of things that artists desire to get at every stop on their tour in the greenroom (the dressing room/backstage area), if you have one. It's an attempt to dictate what kind of hospitality artists receive. For people on the road, this consistency can help make the journey seem less tiresome.

1 • A sample contract and rider are included in our online resources at allages.net/manualfesto.

Some artists make their demands really reasonable and others make a joke out of it and will say things like "only cotton candy Jelly Bellys and Tab soda." The first time I got a rider, it asked for covered parking, a hotel room, a bunch of food, booze, tube socks, and a **BUYOUT** (money you're supposed to give each band member to get food and drinks). I quickly learned that as a talent buyer, you are entitled to cross anything off the list that is outside of your means. Sometimes that's everything, but, of course, you want to try to be as hospitable as possible and honor how tapped bands are when they are touring. I tried to substitute Vitamin Water with Fruit Water at a show once and was chewed out by a worn-out band member — which brings up another issue of working with bands: their behavior and attitude can be hard to predict. The tours can be grueling, the intra-band drama is often high, and you never know what kind of treatment or crowd they had the night before. If you're doing the best you can do, you have to try not to take their beef personally. At the emerging and independent level, however, nine out of ten times performers will be ecstatic to see any gesture of hospitality.

Also included in the contract is the **TECHNICAL RIDER,** which spells out what instruments each band member plays and what they expect from you in terms of sound and lighting. This will often come with a stage plot, a map of where the artists usually set up on stage, which helps the sound engineer know what to expect.

When things are confirmed, you must **ADVANCE** the show with the agent or bands. This means that you send them the address, directions, parking instructions, and the schedule, and make sure you have their technical needs covered. Finally, if you've only been communicating through the internet, make sure you have a way to call the artists on the day of the show and vice versa.

Explaining all this is simply to arm you with the terminology for when you have to use it or know what it means. At the DIY and community level, some of this lingo can be really off-putting to some people, because it seems to be more business-oriented than relationship-oriented. Other people will value this sort of professionalism because it demonstrates a level of commitment to the success of their show. Whatever way you choose to communicate at these different steps, just make sure you and the artists are clear about expectations on both sides.

**Location**

Festivals pose many unique location opportunities. For example, you can arrange to work with several houses or clubs in unison, use an outdoor venue, or get a permit to block off a street and have a block party. You can also get really creative with the process. Rats of Nimh, an all-ages promotion collective in New York City, hosted a moving festival that started in a subway station, got on a train, and ended at a venue.

In picking the location, you should consider how easy a place is to get to by public transportation, whether your audience views it as a desirable place to hang out, and how safe it is for different audience members.

Securing a location legally can take an immense amount of time and paperwork. You'll need to give yourself ample time to deal with rental contracts, liability insurance, and event and parking permits. (Space logistics are also discussed more in Chapter 5.)

**Ticket Sales**

Deciding what to charge for your event is part of figuring out your budget. Go back to the list of costs you need to cover, and think about how to make it as accessible as possible. A business perspective would direct you to think about what your audience's threshold is for spending money on live music and to price the tickets accordingly. Following this logic, you could charge youth much more than adult music fans because they have so little access to music, but that philosophy sucks. And, by the time you read this, the market for big-ticket festivals with almost identical lineups in places from rural Tennessee to metropolitan Spain will be fully saturated.

Getting sponsorship money, creating all-volunteer structures, and getting donations are ways festival organizers can minimize overhead costs.

When thinking about tickets, you'll also need to decide if you want to sell tickets in advance and how. If you aren't worried about having to turn large numbers of people away, you don't need to sell advance tickets, but sometimes it can help you know how promotion is going. One way to do it and avoid expensive service fees is to ask some local businesses, like record stores or coffee shops, to sell advance "tickets" by having them take money and keep a will-call list that you pick up before the show.[2]

2 • Some resources for handling advance ticket sales are listed online at allages.net/manualfesto.

**Sponsorship**

Because festivals have a lot of unique requirements, sponsorships from other nonprofits and for-profits help you get the stuff you need to make the event successful. Sponsorships are similar to donations, but they more explicitly entail an exchange — that the sponsoring company gets something of marketing value out of it.

How you pursue a sponsorship totally depends on the company. At the local business level, it can be as simple as calling the manager and asking if he or she would be interested. For bigger companies, you'll have to submit a proposal to the person in charge of marketing that spells out exactly what you would like from the company (money, ad space, product) and what you will provide in exchange (logo placement, backstage passes, etc.). Some companies have a form you fill out online. You can call in advance and ask what their process is and get a sense of how interested they are.

In an official sponsorship proposal, you offer different sponsor levels to choose from and provide demographic information about your audience, as well as numbers about estimated attendance.

Things you might ask for in a sponsorship:

- Products to give performers and staff, such as food and drinks
- Ad space in a paper or on the radio
- An email announcement to an organization's member list
- Money to pay artists

Things you can offer to sponsors:

- Logo placements or mentions in advertising or at the venue
- Free tickets or backstage passes
- Giveaways of their products or their flyers at the event
- Prominent banner placement

Some companies try to plan out their marketing spending as much as a year in advance and won't jump at the chance to be involved in your event unless there is a big headliner. Don't be discouraged if you can't hook a big check. Working with corporations has its ups and downs and isn't the only option for putting on events. Many event organizers never find it necessary to pursue sponsorships, and some even reject it outright on ideological grounds. More information about working with corporations is in Chapter 6.

**Promotion**

At the local level, there are generally a lot of free and low-cost ways to market an event, but you want to think about how your particular audience is going to find out about it. For young people, aside from using online social networking tools like Myspace, Facebook, Twitter, and Last FM, you can try to have the event listed in school newspapers or mentioned on a radio show that reaches a young audience. You could also put up posters around school campuses and go to other all-ages shows and hand out flyers.

Promotion can be a straightforward calendar listing, or you can get more creative with it and create your own unique marketing campaigns. The all-ages collective Club Sandwich, for instance, decided to make fake IDs to make people appear younger instead of older as a way of promoting their all-ages shows.

**Event Production**

The "production" part of events usually refers to both planning out the logistics and to the part where you're like, "Oh crap, what do we do now?" The former is the part where you figure out how to get things like sound equipment, staging, tables, chairs, concessions, tents, fences, and whatever other materials you may need, as well as scheduling all the people you'll need to work or volunteer at the event. The latter is the troubleshooting that has to happen when not all of your plans pan out. Production takes a special blend of being detail-oriented and very chill.

You'll first want to make and distribute a master schedule for the planning phase and for the event itself. When you're making the master schedule, think about the end date/time and work from there. This means that you work backwards from the day of the event and fill in all the little deadlines, like when you want to have the bands confirmed, the press release out, and the volunteers trained. Things will get more detailed and packed the closer you get to the event. For the day(s) of the festival, the schedule will be the blueprint that maps out how things will work in harmony by detailing all the different things happening at any given time. Think matrix.

On the day of the festival, it's all about the schedule, checklists, and communication; working really hard; and having a lot of fun.

# WAYS TO PROMOTE

## Free Stuff!

Word of mouth — tell everyone you talk to! • Email blasts — it's never too early to start collecting addresses • Your website, blog, Myspace, Facebook, Youtube, Vimeo, or Twitter page • Other free web postings or email newsletters • Calendar listings in daily and weekly newspapers (information usually needs to be sent to media outlets three weeks in advance) • Calendar listings on the radio • Calendar listings in magazines • Press releases or article proposals sent to all of the above outlets[3] • Requesting a song by one of the artists on the local college/public/indie radio or web radio station • Getting ad space donated (this is easier if your event is free or a benefit) or in exchange for sponsorship • Asking a friend or student to donate design of a poster or flyer • Working with public access TV or pirate radio stations

## Stuff That Costs Money

Paying a poster or flyer designer • Getting flyers and posters printed • Buying ad space in print or web media

3 • A sample press list and press release are included in our online resources at allages.net/manualfesto

**People Power**

As mentioned, events take a lot of people working together to make them go smoothly. For a music festival, you'll need:

- Poster and flyer distributors
- Sound engineers and stagehands (people who help the artists, sound and lighting people)
- Lighting designers
- Security helpers
- People who work the door or sell tickets
- Stage managers
- People to sell or give away drinks and snacks
- Runners with cars (people who can be on hand to run and get stuff)
- Lots of "fill in the blank" people to do whatever random things come up

If you're pulling in brand-new people to help out, giving them some sort of training or orientation beforehand will help things run more smoothly. It's helpful to have job descriptions for different positions and ways that the staff can identify one another and be identified by the crowd — say, with stickers, armbands, badges, or T-shirts. If you have your event in venues where the staff is provided, you can arrange to have your volunteers sit at a table with organizational materials, or greet bands and attendees. Doing so can help ensure that the culture you want your event to project is consistent.

The most important thing is to have some clear ways for staff and organizers to communicate with one another. You'll want to schedule times to check in with one another, and make sure there are designated contact people and phone numbers handed out.

**After It's All Said and Done...**

No big event is done when you load out at the end of the day. You should always get together with people to debrief the event — this is usually part evaluation (what worked, what didn't work, what to do differently next time) and part therapy (gossiping, venting, recounting glorious and disastrous moments). Make sure there is fun involved in this meeting.

And, last but not least, you should always graciously thank the people who participated in your event in some personal way (with cards or phone calls) and deal with whatever big issues came up that need to be resolved before moving on..

1729 MARYLAND AVENUE : BALTIMORE, MARYLAND

# CHARM CITY ART SPACE

PRESENTS

# THE FIRST STEP

★OPEN HEART$ · CLEAR MIND$★

## GET the MOST

## ANTI·WASTEOIDS

## COKE BUST

## WARPRIEST




7PM

$7

FRIDAY, OCT. 19TH

# A TYPICAL EVENT

| | EVERYONE | STAGE SCHEDULE |
|---|---|---|
| One or two nights before | PREP | |
| 7:00 AM | LOAD-IN & SETUP | |
| 10:00 AM | PRE-EVENT | |
| 11:00 AM — 12:30 PM | ARTIST ARRIVAL & SOUND CHECK | Headliners load In • Headliners sound check, opener loads in • Opener sound checks while other artists load in |
| 1:00 PM | DOORS | |
| 1:30 PM — 6:05 PM | EVENT | Emcee greets everyone and introduces the event • Opening act • Intermission act • Thank sponsors • Next act • Intermission act • Talk about community partners and purpose of event • Next act • Intermission act • Next act • Intermission act • Thank sponsors again and thank audience • Headliner |
| 7:15 PM | CLEANUP | Final thank you and encourage people to buy merch and pick up their trash |
| 10:00 PM | LOAD OUT | |

# PRODUCTION SCHEDULE

| SPONSORSHIP | MARKETING | PRODUCTION | BOOKING / PROMOTION |
|---|---|---|---|
| Pick up banners and sponsorship items | Do last email / online blast | Gather everything (first aid kits, cash boxes, change, etc.) and load it into vehicle(s) • Make event staff phone lists | Gather copies of contracts • Send artists an emergency contact phone number |
| Set up sponsor area | Set up press area • Put up signage and posters | Set up staging and equipment • Check in volunteers | Set up greenroom or artist area |
| Greet sponsor's volunteers / staff | | | |
| | Hang up posters and signs around the neighborhood directing people to the event | Help with load-in • Sound check and help with load-in | Greet artists and show them around the venue |
| | | Staff in place • Staff meeting | |
| | | | Count door money and pay artists |

## RECORD PRODUCTION

As mentioned earlier, record production follows a similar pattern of choosing the music, getting artwork, and publicizing it, though there are many unique requirements like recording, mixing, mastering, duplication, and distribution. Unlike event production, the process is usually slow, reflective, and repetitive; it requires long stretches of staring at the same tracks on a screen, having hard drives crash, and having more time to get things right.

How you choose to duplicate and distribute records depends on how many copies you want to make, give away, and sell, and what your technology of choice is. With digital technology and the internet changing everything about record production, there is a lot to stay up-to-date on

### Music Training and Programs

In the nonprofit world, "programs" are what happens when there's a problem and an organization goes about solving it. Programs are also what donors and foundations give money to more often than things like staff salaries or rent (those are called general operating expenses). When Vera started, our first program was all-ages concert production — aka shows.

Over the course of the next couple years, the rest of our programs mostly emerged out of necessity. Why did we have an audio engineering program? Because we needed a sound engineer for every show. We developed silk-screen, lighting design, and event-planning programs for the same reasons.

When you're putting on shows and putting out records that rely not only on volunteer labor, but *skilled* volunteer labor, you have to constantly replenish that pool of people. Unless they're already involved in their school's drama department or are paying outrageous tuition costs, young people are not getting access to technical production skills, which may be precisely why you are undertaking this project.

Most of the training that sticks with people comes from hands-on experience and not so much from taking classes. Still, it's good to arm people with some basics before you throw them in front of a mixing board and tell them to start turning knobs. At Vera, we started with skill-share-style conferences, which eventually evolved into ongoing classes and workshops. We created a 101 class for everything and provided more advanced and one-on-one mentoring for people who wanted to

learn more. A couple years into developing it, our sound engineering program looked like this:

1. Sound 101: A class about different kinds of mics, miking instruments, plugging things in, working with bands.
2. Work lots of shows as a sound runner.
3. Monitors: A class where you learn about running the monitor board, usually with a band on hand to act like they are going through a sound check.
4. Work lots of shows on monitors.
5. Troubleshooting: The FAQ of sound system problems.
6. Work lots of shows on the main board with someone on backup.
7. Volunteer to do sound for smaller shows.
8. Get paid as a lead engineer and start training other people.

At first we offered everything for free, and then we started charging $10 to $25 per class so that we could pay the instructor and keep up a fund for sound equipment maintenance. We also prioritized getting the girls who expressed interest in the mix right away, since the world of sound guys could use a few thousand more sound women.

This is just one example of how to develop basic programs that integrate different kinds of learning and take advantage of what you already have going on. As you get more established, you can really work on outreach and try to find out ways to offer your instructors opportunities to get more training as well.

## CULTURE CLUB SPOTLIGHTS

In the next section, we'll look more closely at the evolution of nonprofit youth record production in Oakland, California, and then at all-ages show production in Birmingham, Alabama, and what kind of culture is created by these different efforts.

Youth Movement Records provides space for youth in Oakland to come together in a recording studio to develop and contribute their ideas about art and leadership to the Bay Area's youth community and the larger hip-hop scene, while learning how to put out records themselves. YMR creates a culture of self-determination, social responsibility, and artistic excellence in a primarily African-American youth community through its work and with strong relationships to artists such as the Company of Prophets, Zion I, Jennifer Johns, and Ise Lyfe.

Cave 9 in Birmingham was an all-ages show space created

by and for young adults and teenagers rewriting the social script for access and participation in their local punk and indie scene. They were influenced both by touring indie bands and by working to get local Birmingham bands on the radar.

Both of these organizations took on the difficult and sometimes contradictory work of trying to make it legitimately while challenging norms through their music production. At every step in the logistical production, you can also see simultaneous decisions they make about their cultural production — that is, how they're putting out what they want to see in the world via hip-hop records and punk rock shows.

YMR artists A-1 and D.nok. Photograph by Jason Quigley.




# VITALS

**Located:** Oakland, California • **Founded:** 2003 • **Organization Type:** Youth-driven nonprofit with adult staff • **Music Genre of Focus:** Hip-hop, R&B, reggaeton, funk, rock, and a growing catalogue of stylistic mash-ups • **Goings On:** Roughly one compilation record a year, lots of mix tapes, music videos, company meetings, classes (in songwriting/theory, artist development, production, and more), events and tours, professional internships and special projects. YMR alumni have run writing programs, career skills and development programs, and critical consciousness classes for incarcerated youth. • **Fees:** YMR recently added a $25 registration fee for eight-to-ten week classes. Scholarships are available and nobody is turned away for lack of funds. • **Founding Story:** Musician Chris Wiltsee attended graduate school for social work, youth, and community organizing in Michigan, where he piloted a youth-run record label at the Neutral Zone. He brought the model back to his home in the San Francisco Bay Area and launched YMR after about a year of planning and fundraising. The organization's first program director, Carlos Windham, joined after two years and built on Chris's ideas in partnership with the youth involved. • **Where the Money Comes From:** Foundations, individual contributions, events, sales, and sponsors. • **Claims to Fame:** Youth development alongside artist development through a collective record company. YMR actually gives young people a chance to make some money as artists while learning to be community leaders. YMR artists regularly play out-of-town shows, opening for national headliners. The organization has partnerships with the Recording Academy (the people who put on the Grammys), Amnesty International, and other great organizations that have put them in touch with artists like M.I.A. and Kanye West.

SPOTLIGHT:

# YOUTH MOVEMENT RECORDS

**Oakland, CA**

*By Kameron Moore-Mitchell*

*I remember like yesterday when I broke into the biz, square cat from Michigan said he was lookin' for kids. The new beat of the bay to hold down the fort, some kids with talent is what he's really looking for. I said I'm down just get at me I'm ready for anything in my mind thinking I'm gone be a start by spring. First time in the booth I had a rude awakening trying to lay this wack track, really wasn't no fakin' it. Dude said "Go home you need just a little practice," inside I wanna cry 'cause I really thought I had it. Went home started grindin' trying to keep this from my momma, rappin' she wasn't hearin' it plan was to be a doctor. So I started sneakin' and lyin' performin' on the low ... but in a few weeks I was really on my way.*

This is most of the second verse from one of my favorite songs, a song I wrote and performed; it's called "Initial Komplikations." Every song I write is a story about something in my life, something I've gone through or dealt with, and have overcome or am in the process of overcoming. "Initial Komplikations" is about just that, the complications or obstacles faced before we make it, and the saving grace in each situation that carries us to success. Youth Movement Records was my personal and musical saving grace.

I still remember like it was yesterday when Chris Wiltsee, the founder and executive director of YMR, came to one of my Oakland Youth Commission meetings to recruit some young music-heads. I was hooked once he said "music." I had decided after the first thirty seconds of his speech that I was going to be a part

of YMR, and I was going to do whatever I had to do to make it to the meetings after school. There was one problem — my mother.

My mom wasn't necessarily the biggest hip-hop fan, so she wasn't down with my wanting to be a rapper. As a single parent, she had paid for my private-school education since early childhood. So telling her I wanted to use that valuable education to rap was a slap in the face. That night when I got home from the meeting, I told her YMR was a music program and that I would be helping to implement the program from the ground up. What I failed to mention is that I would also be performing.

## HOW THE COMPANY WORKS

Youth Movement Records is run as a record company that is partially a collective of artists and partially a group of music business and community leaders in the making.

### Company Meetings

In the beginning, YMR's main component was its weekly company meetings. The meetings were held at La Peña Cultural Center on the border of north Oakland and Berkeley on Shattuck Avenue, a neutral and fairly accessible place, and one of the only places open to helping this new program out.

At meetings, we had the chance to talk a little amongst ourselves, eat some snacks, introduce ourselves, and answer icebreaker questions; then we would get down to business. YMR's first meetings included not only rappers and singers but also just as many aspiring music business, label operations, and behind-the-scenes participants. Every meeting, we got something accomplished. In the very beginning, we made a goal, and every meeting following that brought us one step closer to achieving that goal.

### Compilations

One of the main goals in the first year was to produce a compilation album, which would be our first group project and the company's debut release. At every meeting we worked on the album in some way.

We didn't immediately go into the studio, which of course some of us were disappointed about, but looking back I'm actually glad we did it the way we did. It gave us time to organize

some. The artists wrote and perfected songs, producers worked on tracks, and the behind-the-scenes people did marketing and promotion and booked a venue for the album release party. After all the hard work, a release was born — YMR's first compilation, *The Movement*.

## YMR CULTURE AND CONTENT

We collectively picked a name we thought best described what we were trying to do in the Bay Area and what YMR is all about. *The Movement* is still one of my favorite album titles of all time. The simple but complex name references the program, Youth Movement Records, and makes you want to find out for yourself what YMR is all about. Reactions to the compilation were varied, but the purpose of the music was never in doubt.

Even if you hated the music on *The Movement*, there was something undeniably great about the project that you had to respect. Every lyric in every song had a purpose. The artists all told real-life stories, both their own or stories of their community's experiences. Each artist was real and believable.

When it came to writing songs for the compilation, Chris never gave us limitations or restrictions about what we could or could not say. He let us write freely, and worked hard to get us to write songs that meant or were about something.

### Options Instead of Rules

I remember being in the studio for the first time with Chris. I wasn't recording; I was just there to watch my fellow labelmates record and work their magic, since some of them already had some experience in the studio. I remember hearing this particular artist record and looking at the reactions on everyone's face when he started rapping some inappropriate lyrics.

Instead of cutting him off, yanking him out of the vocal booth, and chewing him out, Chris simply waited. Toward the end of the recording session, when he stepped out of the vocal booth, Chris said, "Sounds great!" I was confused and thought, "What the hell? I thought YMR was supposed to be one of those positive things?"

Afterward, Chris let the engineer play back the freshly recorded track. As it was playing, Chris turned to the artist and said, "You know, it's a great song. I'm concerned a little bit about..." I smiled and thought to myself, "That was smooth."

Using suggestion and explanation, he had found the best possible way to tell a young artist how to make his song more honest. Chris gave the artist options: He could leave the track as is, let his friends hear it, and be happy, or change it up just a little and have a track that would be on the YMR album. That track made the first album and is still a hit among YMR fans today.

What community leaders normally do is come right in, lay down the law, and tell participants, "If you don't obey, you're gone." Or even worse, they give no initial rules or guidelines but have plenty of unwritten ones, and when a participant breaks one of these unwritten rules, they're punished. YMR's philosophy is to guide participants through the process of making their own rules.

Within YMR's first few meetings, I noticed something very different from any other program I had been involved with. And I've been in many, from youth government and young entrepreneurship programs to sickle cell camp. While many of them claimed to be youth-run, only YMR took youth ownership seriously. Of course, you need the old peo — I mean, adults — to be involved to a certain degree for legal reasons, expertise, and contacts. But YMR truly allows youth to be involved in every aspect of the company, all the way up to the board of directors. Youth are in control, but they're also given guidance and advice.

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## YMR PROGRAMS AT THE FIVE-YEAR MARK

We learned a lot from our first year, and the following years have added more structure to the program. By 2008, as the program evolved under the direction of Brother Los (Carlos Windham), Chris, and the rest of YMR's teachers and artists, YMR was offering classes and producing records in three cycles per year, directly serving over 400 young people a year. The organization was hosting twelve events annually, releasing a compilation each fall, placing youth in internships each summer, and managing multiple special projects and collaborations.

Over time, company meetings moved from weekly to monthly and a new collective of Youth Movement All-Stars (YMR's touring group of artists) emerged, as did the peer-led process called the Sound Board that defines how tracks are selected for each compilation.

With the simple complexity of YMR album titles like *The Movement*, *Taste Test*, *Change the Nation*, and *Free Style*,

# TIMELINE AND STATS FOR *THE MOVEMENT*

October 2003
First YMR company meeting

December 2003
Started going to the studio every week

March 2004
Picked the tracks and order

April 2004
Chose artwork and name

June 2004
CD release show

Ongoing
(at company meetings):
program evaluation

Number of young folks
involved:
initially, between fifty and
seventy-five

Copies sold by YMR:
250

Copies sold by artists
independently:
400

How tracks were selected:
collectively through a peer-
review process

combined with the program name, Youth Movement Records, you can't help but wonder, open the package, and find out for yourself what YMR is all about. Now, whether or not you love or hate what you hear is up to you, but at least we got you to listen.



*A Bay Area native, Kameron Moore-Mitchell is an emcee, performing and recording artist, DJ, and hip-hop educator. She has been contributing to AMP since the first meeting in 2005. As a student at Xavier University in New Orleans, she has been featured on three compilation albums put together by Youth Movement Records in Oakland and works on solo projects under the name TheSeKondElement.*

*In 2007, Kameron returned home to Oakland to work with YMR directors on a start-up summer hip-hop program for New Orleans's youth, and in 2008 she launched IdleMindz Media & Entertainment Group. To hear more from Kameron, check out myspace.com/thesekondelement and theimmeg.com.*

# CULTURAL PRODUCTION AT YMR *IN* *ONE PAGE*

**What's Worked:**

Lots of planning and forethought • Starting simply with meeting once a week • Providing access to resources • Allowing room for the genuine vision of the young people involved • Structure, stability, consistency • Respect between young people and adults

**Issues:**

Meeting the demand • Providing continuing opportunities for the All-Stars and youth that graduate out of the program

**The Oakland Factors:**

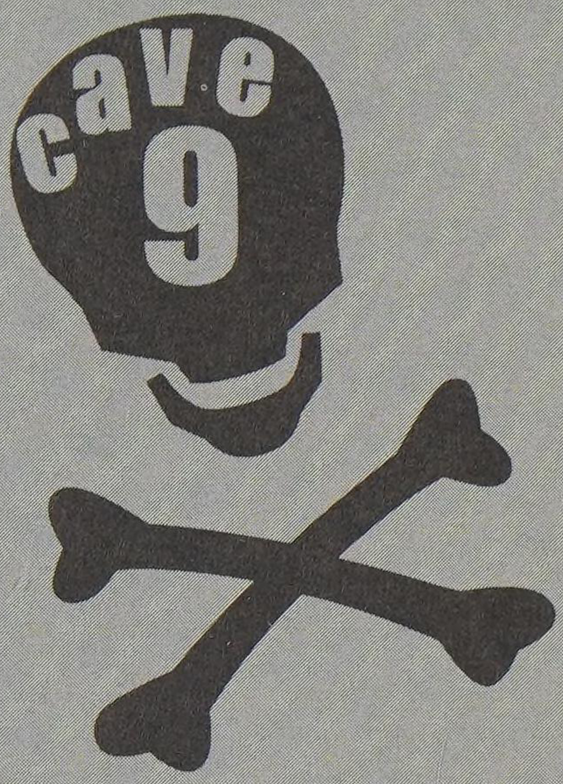
Oakland has a vibrant and supportive community arts scene with several other youth recording programs and record labels • There are ample skilled musicians, engineers, organizers • The immense disparity in wealth in the Bay Area creates a climate in which it is necessary to have these types of nonprofits, and also makes it possible to fund them




*Change the Nation* CD artwork by Ryan Espinosa




Fifth anniversary show at Cave 9. Photo by Nate Dorr.




# VITALS

**Located:** Birmingham, Alabama • **Founded:** 2003 • **Organization Type:** All-volunteer nonprofit collective managed by a small board of directors • **Music Genres of Focus:** Indie rock, punk, hardcore, metal • **Goings On:** All-ages shows and occasional internships • **Fees:** $5-$7 entrance fees for shows • **Where the Money Comes From:** Cave 9's budget is $12,000 for an entire year. They take 35 percent of the door receipts to pay rent, get occasional individual donations, and host benefits. • **Founding Story:** Three Birmingham music enthusiasts in their early 20s saw that there was a lack of accessible music-performance gathering spots, especially for young folks. With a little help and inspiration from other spaces around the country, they opened their doors. • **Claims to Fame:** Putting Alabama on the DIY map. Getting slammed with a $6,000 tax bill. • **The Local Scene:** Birmingham is the cultural center of Alabama, with a population of 250,000. Its main musical influences are blues and country, and the stereotypes about Southern hospitality and omnipresent Christianity are true.

SPOTLIGHT:

## CAVE 9 Birmingham, AL

*By Katy Otto*

My first experience with Cave 9, a volunteer-run all-ages music venue in Birmingham, Alabama, was in the summer of 2003. I was on the biggest tour I had been on in my life with my former band Del Cielo. We had managed to book a show at the space, and with the warm and genuine interactions I had leading up to the date, I was curious to see what it would be like. Being a member of Positive Force, a collective in Washington, D.C., and having worked with spaces around the country such as Gilman and ABC No Rio, I held those venues and my own Washington, D.C.'s Wilson Center as my ideal of punk show spaces: consistent spots that had interesting booking and were known by touring bands as places worth the stop. At that point in time, Cave 9 was relatively new, and I hadn't heard a lot about it.

Nestled on the street corner at the edge of a residential neighborhood, Cave 9 is surrounded by several other warehouse and industrial spaces. You have to walk up close to the venue to see the sign with its name, and the posters and flyers announcing upcoming shows in the windows.

We showed up on time for load-in and played with two bands from New Orleans, Rat in a Bucket and A Hunger Artist, and a larger national touring act called Jet Black. The volunteers and board members present (including Cave 9 cofounder and board member Aaron Hamilton) greeted us warmly and explained how the night would work. After years of touring, it put my mind at ease knowing that there was a person in charge of sound, an arrangement for

money, and an order and schedule to the show.

In 2007, I returned to Birmingham to meet with Cave 9 leaders and talk about what it takes to put on all-ages music shows in a community like theirs.

## A PRIMER ON BARE-BONES ALL-AGES SHOW PROMOTION

They key to making Cave 9 work, like for many DIY spaces, is to have virtually no overhead expenses. Volunteers make up the labor that keep this space alive. The venue takes 35 percent of the door so that they can pay rent, and then they use relationships and resourcefulness to do everything else they need to do, from publicity to bookkeeping. Technical staff, nice equipment, and food and drinks are the sorts of things that are usually underwritten by alcohol sales, sponsorship, or higher ticket prices at other venues or fundraised for at nonprofit venues. Cave 9 provides just the basics.

The organization shares its space with an artist who owns the building and teaches classes Monday through Wednesdays, leaving the rest of the days of the week for Cave 9. The venue holds up to 300 people and feels comfortable for both small and large audiences. Putting the emphasis on youth inclusion, shows at Cave 9 start at 7 p.m. and usually end before 11 p.m., making it possible for younger folks to see, volunteer, and play there.

The venue consistently hosts a wide range of genres within a punk and indie spectrum. At the show I attended, an acoustic punk band named the Judy Garland Death Squad played following a night of metal, heavy rock, and a dancey electronic band.

### Working with Bands

Because Cave 9 is run by volunteers, they try to cut down on work by explicitly communicating criteria and processes online. The website politely notes that volunteers are unable to respond to every email requesting a show, that the space has a simple PA, and that payments are small.

Unlike some DIY spaces, Cave 9 works with outside promoters and booking agents quite a bit. Most are accommodating of the fact that the space doesn't make a ton of money, that the local scene is pretty small, and that the venue doesn't sell alcohol. Bills are determined 90 percent of the time by the person

organizing the show who sometimes is a Cave 9 person and sometimes is an outside organizer. The person in charge of organizing the show decides how the other 65 percent of the door receipts are split up. Most bands are fed and housed by the promoters of the show. There is no greenroom at Cave 9, and no fulfillment of any riders.

There are a few bands that have outgrown Cave 9, but capacity is only an issue with "douchebag bands with douchebag expectations of themselves," according to Will Butler, another board member. He goes on to explain that very few punk bands draw 400 kids in Birmingham (or anywhere!) except by fluke.

Internally, the booking process is made simpler by the fact that one person handles most of the communication and management of the schedule, though other people can participate in the decision-making process.

In terms of publicity, Cave 9 focuses on using as much free publicity as possible. The *Birmingham Weekly*, a free local paper, is very good about helping out and running promos on Cave 9 bands on a regular basis. Radio isn't such a useful promotion tactic in Birmingham, according to Will, so they don't bother. Shows can range from ten kids to 300, but forty is a pretty good average.

If bands are disrespectful to the space, or sexist, racist, or homophobic, they may be asked not to come back. Because of the high level of trust among board members, it's often not a big issue, and there's usually a natural consensus about what to do. As far as I can tell, the process for sorting these situations out isn't fully documented or outlined in bylaws.

## MORE THAN SHOWS

In place of the usual club perks, Cave 9 offers something else. "You can't really understand it unless you are a part of it," explains cofounder Aaron Hamilton in Joey Brown's Cave 9 documentary *We Have Too Much Heart,* referencing a hard-to-pin-down feeling of growing and changing through new relationships and a commitment to a space, a scene, and something that doesn't exist anywhere else. "I've met a ton of people that I wouldn't have had the opportunity to [meet]. It's become a family. It's helped me grow as a person," he says.

In speaking with people in traveling bands up and down the East Coast, I heard over and over from people — who had never been to the space — how they hoped to play there

some day. Bands on a national and international punk touring circuit remember and speak about the space. Even stalwarts Against Me! have continued to play at Cave 9 despite the fact that they usually play much larger venues. I had the opportunity to personally experience the effort the space puts into their shows, and it propped up my morale amid a long and exhausting tour.

**Putting Birmingham on the Map**

In order to bank on more than their charm, Cave 9 community members are undertaking their own projects to publicize the space and to build up the local scene.

One such project is the zine *God and Taxes*. Board members, volunteers, and showgoers collaborated on the zine, which serves as documentation of creative ideas coming out of the space and is taken out on tour by the few local bands that are hitting the national circuit. "That's something we really hope that the space can spark," explains board member Will Butler. "Birmingham bands are taking what they are doing on the road, because very few bands from here tour much."

Similarly, Joey Brown posted his documentary in two seven-minute shorts on YouTube to explain and illustrate what Cave 9 is and why it was founded. Get the links at resources.allages.net.

**Taxes and Politics at Cave 9**

Cave 9 is also different from most alternative show spaces because it operates legally. It is somewhat uncommon for a DIY punk venue started by a group of friends to take the legitimacy leap in order to establish itself as an institution. Unfortunately, at the end of going through the grueling process of becoming an independent nonprofit, the state of Alabama came after Cave 9 for $6,000 worth of back taxes owed for the years of operation before incorporating (insert knowing smirks and groans here).

Fortunately, by accepting donations online and reaching out to the community it has served in the past four years, Cave 9 has managed to cover half of this debt.

Even with so much support and recognition, Cave 9 is scraping by as sort of an outsider youth arts venue, and it continues to struggle with its nominal monthly payment plan. "Unless, you have 'sponsored by the church of...' somewhere on your flyer or in the mission statement, it's usually not immediately liked," Aaron says, illustrating the local lay of the land.

I asked Aaron and other board members about the role

the space plays in youth political engagement, locally or otherwise. "This isn't a space that's about proselytizing — that is kept to a minimum. However, we do have some left-related benefit events and some bands with left-leaning politics that express their views when they play. Really, though, this place is about respect and an emphasis on thinking for yourself," he explains.

Board members later added that they had held several voter registration drives in the space in conjunction with shows. In one month, they collected and mailed off more than 100 voter registration forms.

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## THE CULTURE OF CAVE 9: BEST FRIENDS FOREVER

At its inception, Aaron and the other cofounder, Angelica Hankins, wanted to establish a long-standing space in Birmingham that was open, inviting, and free from pretension and exclusivity.

I experienced this personally in the three board members and slew of volunteers I met who took the time to talk to me and tell me about future plans for Cave 9. As we held an informal meeting in the space before the show, younger showgoers were pulling up in cars. One mother came up to the door with her children, greeted Will and Aaron, and asked what time she should come back. The friendliness with which Will and Aaron responded really stood out to me. I often think that nontraditional spaces for shows can be intimidating at first, and the intimidation serves as a gatekeeper that determines who has access to the venue.

When I asked questions about conflict, board members said there had been more conflict earlier on, before members' roles were well defined. Yet, having a tight-knit group of friends running a community organization can pose problems in the long run. Aside from the challenges of working through interpersonal rifts amid organizing, it can be hard to fit new people in. But Cave 9 has tried to battle a feeling of cliquishness. Those involved have expanded beyond the initial friendship group, and the organization relies on fifteen core volunteers who are dedicated to growing this community space.

"We have kids coming here starting as young as 14," Will says. "Some might come on a night where they don't necessarily even know the bands, because they don't feel comfortable in other settings, maybe at school or at home, and this is a place

Cave 9. Photo by David Clyburn.



where they are given permission to be themselves." He talked about kids meeting new people and forming their first bands with others they meet at the space.

To intentionally reach out to younger folks, Cave 9 has had two summer internship positions whereby young people gained skills around all aspects of show production — booking, payment negotiation, promotion, running the door, running sound, attending to the crowd, and serving as a liaison with the bands.

Renee Clay, another board member, also mentioned that, when they started the space, often only five girls would be at a large show, and recently those numbers have risen. Because Renee plays such a strong role in the space's organization, girls see that women organize and run spaces, put on shows, play in bands, and have a voice.

Given all of these community-oriented characteristics, it makes sense for Cave 9 to see itself as similar to other public charities. The nonprofit status has not only established a formal structure that has helped to institutionalize and sustain the organization longer than most DIY spaces, but it has also helped to legitimize Cave 9 as a part of the local arts community.

While Will noted that phrases such as "nonprofit youth center" might give people the impression that it was either religiously affiliated or boring, he knows that couldn't be further from what Cave 9 actually is. This is confirmed by *We've Got Too Much Heart*, which features audiences writhing, bands wailing, friends goofing off, stencils being hung up as art and then covered up in a cleanup effort flash, and volunteers explaining how the value of Cave 9 can't be summed up in a nonprofit catch phrase. For young people under 21, it's important, because it's the only public, social place they've got. For some folks over 21, it's the only place that allows them to be a part of independent culture. For the woman who had never been to Cave 9 but sent in a $25 online donation anyway, it's an opportunity to support the next generation of artists and community leaders.

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*Katy Otto has ten years of experience in fundraising for violence prevention, women's issues, youth development, and arts organizations. She runs her own independent record label Exotic Fever Records and has led workshops on such diverse topics as direct action around issues of violence against women, community response to sexual assault, animal abuse and partner violence, punk rock activism, and women and girls in music. Ms. Otto has toured the country several times playing drums*

*in her former band Del Cielo, and is currently working on two new bands, Helsinki and Trophy Wife. She co-founded the national Visions in Feminism conference, and for twelve years has been a member of Positive Force DC, a volunteer punk collective that organizes concerts, events, and community actions for social change.*

**Note:**

After seven years spanning three locations, Cave 9 finally shut its doors for good in March 2009, after a show was shut down by the fire marshal at the benest of a neighboring business, followed by a cease and desist order from the mayor's office. It's a disappointment, but it doesn't invalidate the many things that Cave 9 did right, and we know that its influence will live on for the thousands of people it inspired

# PUTTING ON SHOWS AT CAVE 9 *IN ONE PAGE*

**What's Worked:**

Keeping overhead low by sharing a building and having lots of uncompensated elbow grease and gear humping • Making space for youth by programming accordingly and building trust with teenagers and parents • Making people expect very little and then killing them with hospitality. Cave 9 publicizes that they don't have much to offer bands — how much artists adore the space shows their true generosity.

**Issues:**

Only a few people in leadership positions and piles of work to do • Reluctance to ask too aggressively for support and donations from the community, even when facing serious financial difficulty.

**The Birmingham Factor:**

Birmingham is a cultural hub, a college town, and a conservative religious community. Cave 9's niche is small.


chapter
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All-Ages Music For the underage
Singing Snail
Harpin' Squirrel
Worm Synth
Tar Cat
Turtle Rock
Low End Seagull
Shaky Dog
AF

Artwork • Kyle Field

CHAPTER THREE

# I.D. OLOGY

## All-Ages Music for the Underage

*Looking for a ride to your secret location / Where the kids are setting up a free-speed nation, for you / Got a foghorn and a drum and a hammer that's rockin' / And a chord and a pedal and a lock, that'll do me for now / It better work out / I hope it works out my way / 'Cause it's getting kind of quiet in my city's head / Takes a teen age riot to get me out of bed right now*

Sonic Youth • "Teen Age Riot"

From here on out, the chapters in this book delve deeper into the specifics of starting and sustaining a community music venue, studio, or program. I want to kick off the in-depth section of this book with a chapter about meaningful youth participation and leadership. I want to do this because, by and large, young people are getting shafted.

Over the past thirty years, open space, public space, and cultural experiences have become very age-segregated, with teenagers losing out in almost every instance. For young people whose interests fall outside of sports or other mainstream opportunities finding a place to fit in can be hard, especially for those interested in music. Aside from the occasional pop concert in a sports arena, opportunities to come together around (let alone perform) music are extremely limited for young people, largely because these activities are seen as gateways to trouble and are confined to age-restricted spaces.

The cause is a catch-22 of public-safety rhetoric:

- Teenagers are menaces to the public who must be closely monitored and controlled.
- Teenagers are at constant risk of being preyed upon and must be monitored and controlled.

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## LEGISLATING AGAINST YOUTH

Ordinances and laws created to validate this circular thinking dramatically affect the quality of life for teenagers, especially for older teens. Here are a few examples:

### The National Drinking Age and State Liquor Boards

The idea of age-segregated establishments in connection with alcohol sales is unique to the United States Interestingly, the national drinking age of 21 hasn't been with for us that long (nor has it been statistically proven to decrease the number of young people who drink). It was established in 1984, when the advocacy group Mothers Against Drunk Driving orchestrated one of the most effective "blame the youth" campaigns ever, disguised as a public-safety measure, using questionable statistics and disproportionately blaming teens for drunk driving accidents.[4] For the next twenty-plus years, that lobbying tactic would become standard for anti-youth legislation.

Designating 21 as the legal age for drinking, has, by default, made 21 the minimum age to participate in local music scenes and in many social and cultural events. Many state liquor laws go beyond regulating consumption of alcohol to regulating entrance into an establishment that serves alcohol. State liquor boards find creative ways to reclassify licenses and redefine the way different establishments can or can't do business. Since most music shows are held in bars and cafés, young people are left counting down the days until they turn 21 — three years older than the legal age to vote, go to strip clubs, fight in wars, or be locked up for life — or, if they are lucky enough to have money, lenient parents, and a car, they can drive hundreds of miles to a big festival to see indie acts that they could see for a fraction of the cost if only they were the magical right age. Most people still can't figure out why these kinds of laws don't apply to sporting arenas and stadiums, where beer can flow freely between people above

4 • Alex Koroknay-Palicz, "Legislative Analysis for the National Minimum Drinking Age Act," National Youth Rights Association, 2005, www.youthrights.org/legana.php

and below the legal drinking age. All-ages music activists have started to target these state agencies as viable places to apply pressure in order to change license classifications and open up more cultural venues to young people.

**The RAVE Act**

The Reducing American's Vulnerability to Ecstasy Act is part of the modern-day War on Drugs, which disproportionately affects young men of color. The Drug Policy Alliance in New York City writes that the law "makes promoters, club owners, and musicians responsible for the drug offenses of their patrons and fans." After significant public outcry, the RAVE Act was shelved, but it reappeared in the "Illicit Drug Anti-Proliferation Act" sponsored by then-Senator Joe Biden, as a provision tacked on to an unrelated bill and enacted in 2003. Originally aimed at the electronic music scene, the new law has language that is potentially broad enough to federally imprison any owner of a music club or home where a person with illegal substances is on the premises.

**Local Dance Bans and All-Ages Ordinances**

Young showgoers don't generally refer to concerts as "teen dances" or "sock hops." Nonetheless, lots of cities have laws about teen dancing that classify music shows as dances and apply the same *Footloose* mentality to them. These laws are written as if young folks are at greater risk of having sex with one another, shooting one another, or being preyed upon by adults if there is music involved. Even New York City has anti-dancing cabaret laws that were created to target Harlem jazz clubs in the 1920s. Liberal San Francisco has had years of debate over dancehall permits and event ending times for different age groups.

More recently, cities are enacting all-ages ordinances to regulate how and where all-ages shows happen. In the best cases, they are reasonable and written with young people and music-industry folks involved in the process. In the worst cases, politicians and scared parents/voters try to make teenagers safer by banning all-ages shows wholesale.

Laws that go overboard with fines and jail time for things like skateboarding outside a skate park and tagging, along with other misguided local regulations, all contribute to an overall lockdown on youth culture and behavior. And since youth under

Dirty Projectors at Silent Barn. Photo by

18 can't vote and are rarely consulted in the process of writing public policy, they have little power or motivation to help address these policies that affect their lives so dramatically.

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## YOUTH INVOLVEMENT BY DEFAULT AND BY DESIGN

Organizations like the ones featured in this book are counteracting the anti-youth trend by actively seeking out and making space for youth participation. How central youth participation and leadership is to existing all-ages programs varies. Some organizations identify as Youth organizations with a capital Y, while other organizations use the term "all-ages" to indicate a music space/event/program that is youth-friendly in a culture that isn't.

Kevin Erickson of Department of Safety, an all-ages art space in Anacortes, Washington, said in 2007:

> I don't think the founders really had youth issues in mind when they started the DoS six years ago. They were just going for basic accessibility, envisioning a place where all kinds of people could gather and have access to music and art. Today, the youth aspect is more central to our identity and programming, and I expect that to continue, but it's something that's developed organically, almost accidentally, simply because young people are drawn to creative spaces that don't exclude them or talk down to them.

With a few more years under its belt, 924 Gilman Street in Berkeley, California, consciously walks the line of being both a punk living room and a youth organization. "I read something last year about the club at Eighth and Gilman being a place where teens could go and 'dance,' but the people we've seen lined up outside it looked a little scary," a mom wrote in a blog entry on the Berkeley Parents Network website about the member-run punk venue.

Had she gone in for a show, she might have felt the same. There a lot of things about Gilman that remain true to the feeling of having shows haphazardly organized in illegal and alternative spaces. Yet other parents responded to the skeptical mom in support of the venue: "This organization has effectively created a positive place for youth, featuring music, art

exhibits, speakers, and other unique events for the benefit of the younger community," one parent wrote.

The opportunities for growth, development, and leadership at Gilman, DoS, and many of these spaces are not only available, they're an integral part of the organizations. This is because the issues that crop up in these organizations demand a high level of commitment and responsibility from everyone involved, and youth are often the ones that step up to the plate. This is a model of youth leadership development that happens by default and works pretty well. It's otherwise known as do-it-yourself (DIY).

On the other end of the spectrum from DoS and spaces like it are organizations where academics and trained professionals workshop and develop the same positive things that happen organically in scrappier organizations, and then enhance them with more structure and a bigger safety net. The Neutral Zone in Ann Arbor, Michigan, which we will look at later, is one such organization that is set up as youth community center; it houses the country's first youth-owned record label and concert-promotion company, and sets a high bar for what meaningful youth ownership with adult involvement looks like.

## NONPROFIT YOUTH PROGRAM LANGUAGE 101

If you're like me and many of the writers in this book, you might start out booking shows or running small after-school music programs, and then suddenly find yourself needing to know things that people with master's degrees and PhDs know — like what a "youth developmental asset" is and how to measure it.

You are now caught in the professionalizing current of the nonprofit world. Many people doing grassroots work end up in this position, expected to know about academic theories and professional practices in a field they fell into when simply trying to improve things around them.

I'll break down some terms in the world of youth work:

### Youth Development

In 2002, catching the wave of momentum of youth workers across the country, the National Academies published a report, "Community Programs on Youth Development," that represented a big shift in professionals' approach to youth work.

This report encouraged people to go beyond identifying what's wrong with kids and trying to treat their symptoms, instead taking a holistic view of youths' lives and trying more big-picture approaches. The report has lists of assets that should be developed at different stages of a young person's life and describes the environments that help them along. Beyond some of the most basic needs (like access to shelter and healthy food), you'd be surprised how much of it applies directly to community spaces for music and art opportunities.

Information about what is called "the positive developmental asset approach" to youth development is fairly accessible on the internet and especially handy for things like grant writing. Referencing developmental assets can help you convince adults and officials to support your work by demonstrating that it is backed by research.

**Youth Leadership**

Within the youth development field, there are a lot of subfields. Youth leadership is one of these subfields, and you may have come across it if you live in a place where there is a youth commission. In the past two decades, cities across the nation have started setting up youth commissions, and both for-profit and nonprofit organizations are finding ways to put youth in leadership. This trend springs from the idea that youth should be active participants and have a real say in stuff that affects them (or that others are trying to sell to them), which seems, um, sort of obvious.

Youth organizing is leadership development that specifically arms young people with important community- or campaign-organizing skills that allow them to build power and influence to change their surroundings.

More and more foundation programs and public funding streams are dedicated to youth leadership and organizing. Nonprofits that benefit the most from those funds focus on college campuses, like big organizations doing environmental and political work (think Sierra Club or Young Republicans and Democrats).

**Alternative Opportunities**

Even with these investments, many young people are steering clear of these and other leadership opportunities for a whole host of reasons. First, and most obviously, it could be because, by funneling money into college-based programs, almost 40 percent of high school graduates are automatically

left out simply because they aren't enrolled.[5] Second, outreach materials generally leave something to be desired in the language and design department by using cheesy and generic youth content. Also, there is the fact that youth simply lose interest in participating in any more activities that feel obligatory and culturally irrelevant to them.

A lot of this has to do with having a limited exposure to styles of leadership. After years of being shuffled through hierarchical institutions, many young people are uncomfortable with or skeptical of the notion of leadership they've been presented with, and see their options for leadership linked to competition and popularity contests. Think student government, 4-H, or even sports programs. While one or two young people will feel the glory of a leadership title or spot on the team, lots of others end up feeling inadequate and resentful of the processes.

Music and cultural organizations that are open to anyone interested, on the other hand, break this mold and provide positive alternatives to competitive and hierarchical leadership opportunities.

In 2006, AMP surveyed fifty all-ages music and art organizations in depth about youth leadership.[6] This is what we found out:

- 87 percent said that peer-to-peer communication and collaboration (not competition!) is key to their structure.
- 70 percent said youth participants are responsible for planning and implementing programs.
- 50 percent offered formal leadership training; 42 percent had a staff team made up entirely or mostly of people who are 24 and younger.
- 40 percent had youth positions on the board of directors.

What was even more telling was that 40 percent said they regularly get called upon to refer and place young people in jobs outside their organizations, like doing sound at another club or marketing for a music company. Forty-two percent said that young people started other cultural organizations and businesses after leaving their organization. These findings indicate that music opportunities are not only engaging for young people, but really arm them with leadership, job and life skills.

5 • "Educational Attainment in the United States": U.S. Census Bureau, Dec. 27, 2007, www.census.gov/population/www/socdemo/education/cps2007.html

6 • Shannon K. Stewart, project report, All-ages Movement Project, 2006. Available at allages.net/manualfesto

# THE DOWNSIDE TO ALL THIS FOCUS ON "YOUTH"

As I transitioned from being a young founder of a mostly youth organization to being an adult staff person at that same youth-run organization, I started getting involved with the professional youth worker scene and found myself a little disillusioned. Partly, I was experiencing a significant aesthetic separation being somewhat younger and coming from a music background rather than a social service background. Then there was the language — the labeling everything as "teen" this or "youth" that felt clinical and detached.

Some things that make nonprofit youth work difficult for me to swallow at times:

- The implication that youth music and art activities have an age-restricted audience and are without value to non-teens in our community
- The idea that the value of a youth space would be related to the value of keeping young people out of other public spaces Holding a job that seems dependent on the inequality — you know?
- The pressure to reinforce negative aspects of youth life in order to justify getting funding, creating nonprofits, and having a paycheck.

People trying to challenge the one-way youth service paradigm form the youth liberation movement and advocate real youth-led projects, often calling them "by and for youth." This conjures up a utopian image of 14- and 15-year olds signing leases, hosting fundraisers, running 48-channel soundboards, and staffing teen centers where their peers come in to play music, breakdance, or debate over the latest gaming equipment. There are a few projects where this is close to the truth.

But largely, the idea of being by and for youth has caught on enough in funding and media circles that this populist tagline is being interpreted rather broadly. In some cases, youth organizations with this declaration have adults behind the scenes pulling a lot of the strings. Others are collectives of young adults that start shows at 9:30 at night in semi-legal places where people can bring their own beers and actual teenagers are few and far between. Both have clear ways in which they are not actually "by" or "for" youth and bring into question whether it's better to strive for more age separatism or more youth access and power within intergenerational spaces everywhere.

**Youth-Led**

In order to incorporate youth leadership, you have to address the adult-centric culture of an organization. Young people must have real authority and be able to see and feel the effects of their decisions. The pressure to be more professional and have people with multiple degrees running organizations in order to get funding makes this especially hard.

Enter the term "youth-led." The Movement Strategy Center in Oakland, California, defines the phrase like this:A youth-led project is one in which the youth constituents decide what gets done and how it gets done. Youth-led does not necessarily mean "no adult involvement or role." "Youth-led" is a specific relationship between youth and adults where adults are supporting youth to gain the skills, information and capacity to make decisions about the organizations in which they find themselves. Adults play the roles of coaches, trainers, and advisors to young people who are the decision makers. Youth leadership promotes the notion that adult allies should not do for youth what young people can do for themselves.[7]

7 • "Making Space, Making Change: Profiles of Youth-Led and Youth-Driven Organizations", Young Wisdom Project, Movement Strategy Center, 2004, www.movementstrategy.org/media/docs/1892_MSMC.pdf.

## BUILDING YOUTH POWER IN YOUR ORGANIZATION

Ideally, creating a more youth-friendly culture in existing spaces and rethinking the merit and effectiveness of age-based laws would be a simpler way to make space for youth than building multimillion-dollar teen centers (not to mention detention centers) in every town. But unfortunately, it's not. The way people think about age as it relates to experience, competency, reliability, and rights isn't learned only in school; it's indoctrinated through workplace hierarchies, media, product marketing, legislation, and the justice system. This huge interlocking web makes it really hard, regardless of good intentions, not to internalize and reinforce negative perceptions of youth.

So, how about some new things to program, promote, and legislate?

Things like:

- Young people are responsible for and capable of making communities healthier, safer, and more culturally vibrant.
- Young people have the agency (capacity and ability) to address their own issues, but not always the access to



Volunteers running the door at Fredericksburg All Ages in Fredericksburg, VA. Photo by Ian Soper.

resources, to address their own issues.

- Young people have the right to self-determination — that is, to identify and be wholly recognized as they choose.
- Young people are great artists, bookers, promoters, sound techs, publicists, staff, and board members.

Now, repeat that 100 times a day.

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## CHECKLISTS FOR YOUTH ENGAGEMENT

Of course, just reading these things or talking about them in a meeting doesn't mean the work is done. It's a constant process of checking in. So, here are some checklists.

### Programs

- Are your programs set up to be accessible to youth?
- Do they start and end at reasonable times so that young people can attend and volunteer?
- Are they affordable and accessible by public transportation?
- Are the time commitments appropriate for young people in both quantity and duration?
- Is the content appealing to a young audience?

### Outreach

It's best to ask young people directly about how they find out about things. This is a surprisingly underused marketing tactic.

- Have you asked young people where they find out about stuff to do?
- Did you use those channels?

Going through teachers and parents to reach young people can be a better way to reach teachers and parents than young people. You should try to do outreach through schools, since most young people have to go there, but do it creatively. Most school newspapers are run by students, for example. This is a good place to start.

Also, putting on good shows is one of the best ways to do outreach.

### Trainings

Most people are not aware of adultism, pervasive age segregation, and the negative impacts these things have on young people. This does not mean that they are bad people or that they have no business being involved in youth empowerment efforts. Everyone carries around hurtful stereotypes and bias that take effort to unlearn. Young people, similarly, have age

biases that prevent them from forming good relationships with adults, as well as internalized ideas about themselves that are disempowering.

In order for young people to be ready to occupy leadership positions, they need resources and information the same way that adults need information on how to share those leadership roles with youth.[8] It may be that the style of available training resources doesn't really fit the culture of your organization, so you might need to modify them but with a genuine interest in getting better at making space for young people, you'll come up with the best set of practices for your community.

If there is tension in your organization between adults and young people, here are some questions to consider:

- What's causing the rub between youth and adults in your organization? When exactly is it happening, and why?
- Which of those things are perceptions (stereotypes), and which are real issues?
- Can the tension be relieved with a conversation about those things?
- How open do people seem to be to working through this kind of stuff? What kind of process for addressing these issues will serve your group well?
- Are there people from other organizations and businesses who can come in and talk to your organization about their experience of youth input and leadership?

**Areas for Youth Input in Organizations**

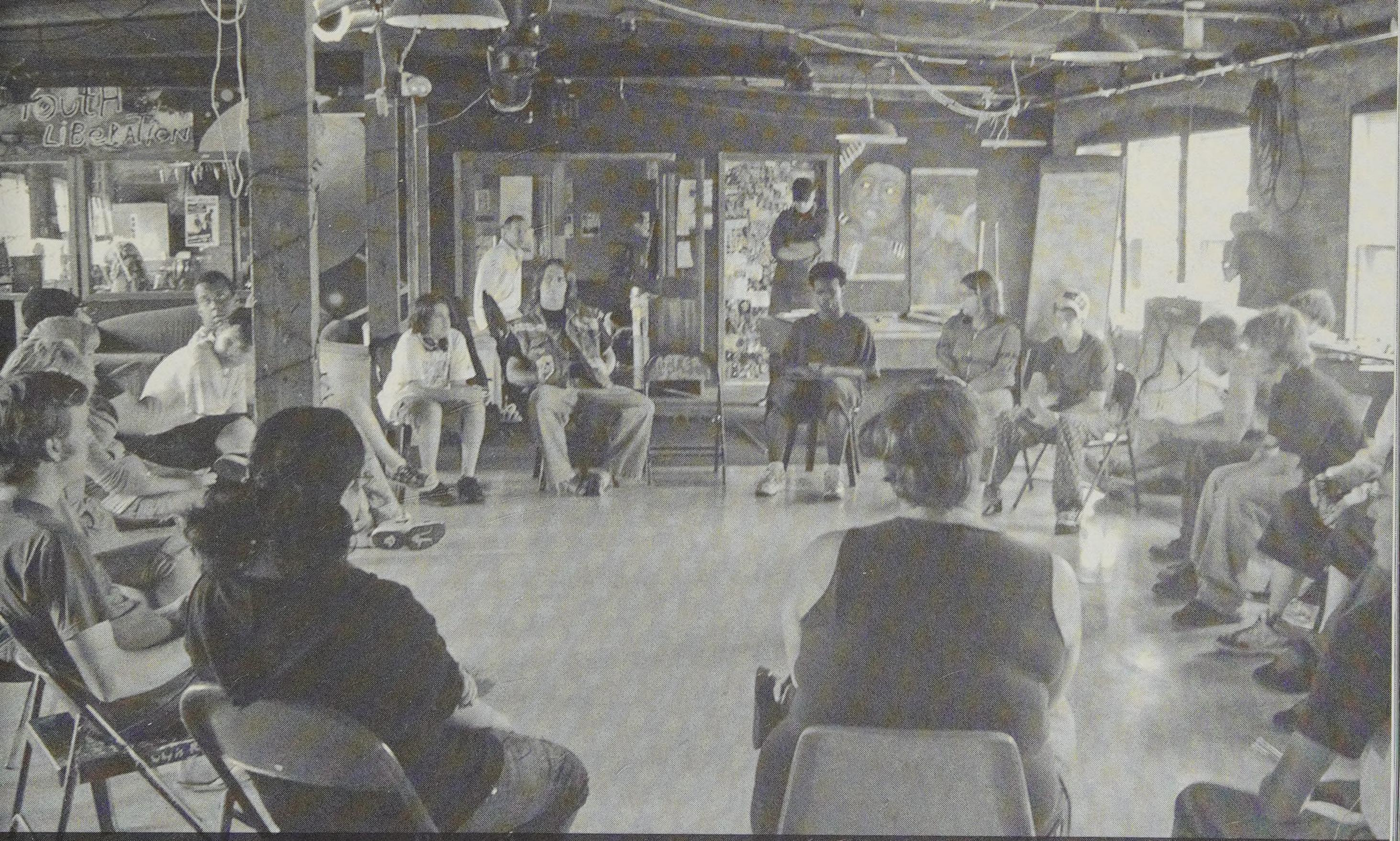
Here are some areas where youth input is critical:

- Designing, implementing and evaluating programs
- Hiring staff
- Electing or appointing leaders
- Booking performers, choosing tracks on a CD, or anything related to music
- Choosing partners and collaborators
- Learning about and helping with finance, administration, bookkeeping, and fundraising

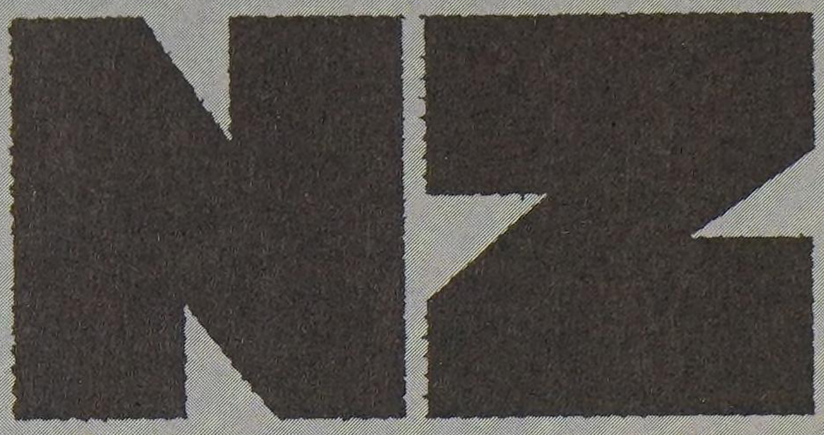
8 • Books and organizations that can help are listed in our online resources at allages.net/manualfesto

## I.D.OLOGY SPOTLIGHT

With all these questions to think about, we'll look at an adult-staffed, youth-led teen center in Ann Arbor, Michigan. The Neutral Zone, as mentioned earlier, is an organization that has put an immense amount of time into studying, understanding, and practicing teen leadership for more than a decade.




Meeting at the Neutral Zone. Photo by Shannon Stewart.



# VITALS

**Located:** Ann Arbor, Michigan • **Founded:** 1998 • **Organization Type:** Youth-driven teen center • **Music Genre of Focus:** Rock, hip hop, indie, experimental, hardcore, metal, funk • **Goings On:** Neutral Zone hosts more than twenty programs in the areas of education, music performance and technology, literary arts, visual arts, and community leadership. Additionally, there is a drop-in community space after school, as well as youth-run weekend concerts and special events. • **Fees:** Weekend concerts cost $5 with a high school ID and $7 for the general public. There is a $100 annual program fee for access to all of the Neutral Zone's twenty-three programs, with opportunities for partial and full scholarships. Dropping in is free. • **Where the Money Comes From:** Of the $750,000 budget, approximately one-third comes from grants, one-third comes from individual gifts, and one-third comes from rentals, program revenues, and special events. • **Claims to Fame:** The Neutral Zone has a youth-driven leadership structure, including a board of directors composed of up to 50 percent teens. Programs include an award-winning national slam poetry team, a youth-owned record label company, weekend concerts, and a youth-curated production — Breakin' Curfew — featuring the diverse talents of more than 100 youth and an audience of more than 1,400 youth. • **Founding Story**: The initial idea was that high-school-age teens needed a community space in this college-focused town. Teens wrote the first grant that funded the organization. It was originally located in an old warehouse on the edge of the downtown; but recentlt purchased, renovated, and moved to a new centrally located building in downtown Ann Arbor, just a couple of blocks from the city's bus station. • **The Local Scene:** The Neutral Zone is located in downtown Ann Arbor, Ace Deuce to many young folks, and is the home of the University of Michigan, one of the biggest universities in the U.S. Though there is a large, wealthy, educated population, there are still pockets within Ann Arbor and the surrounding communities where youth are struggling and left without any opportunities.

## SPOTLIGHT: THE NEUTRAL ZONE Ann Arbor, MI

*By Gavin Leonard*

While parents are consistently looking for ways to keep their kids engaged and active, yearning for them to become productive citizens as they move toward adulthood, young people are equally interested in having things to do, developing social networks, and identifying interests that they can explore. When conversations began about how to meet the needs of parents and teenagers in Ann Arbor, Michigan, in 1998, it became clear that both young people and adults needed each other to get what they wanted. By working together, they created the Neutral Zone (NZ), a community cultural center by and for youth. "It was bizarre," said Lisa Dengiz, a cofounder of NZ. But it worked.

Adults brought some of the skills and connections, such as a Harvard MBA to help with finance and fundraising, and an attorney to write up the IRS paperwork to become a nonprofit. Teens brought relationships and the real-world knowledge of what young people wanted and how to spread the word. It didn't hurt that the University of Michigan — the type of resource that is not easily accessible to most of us around the country — provides volunteers, student interns, and opportunities to engage in research projects. Not all of us have networks of professionals willing to share their time, money, and insights to see the ideas of young people materialize, so it's impossible to separate what's intriguing and noteworthy about the Neutral Zone from the hard fact that the organization has unique access to an adult community that is talented and giving.

But what's beautiful about the Neutral Zone is not so much that parents and teens were able to connect, but how much of a commitment everyone made to ensuring that young people would be at the center of the work. They recognized from the start that building youth power was essential to building a sustainable and successful project that would stand the test of time. Very early on, they brought in Greg Levine from a youth program called Building Bridges in Madison, Wisconsin — their successful programming had been going for nearly 20 years — to learn from him. "He got adults and teens together, and he trained them on how to deal with one another," said Lisa Dengiz.

It can be easily argued that the Neutral Zone practices the concept of youth leadership more than any other teen center or music organization in the country. While there are organizations that develop leaders and respect the power of young people in a variety of ways, at the Neutral Zone, young people are active at the highest decision-making levels. As Emma Tolman, a 15-year-old who is on the executive committee of the board of directors, told me, "It's the teens with the ideas, the plan, and the vision."

As an outsider, learning about the Neutral Zone and boiling down its notable and replicable practices presents a problem. Their long history, their voluminous documentation, their academic tendencies, and their broad programming make their processes hard to simplify and articulate — plus, it's hard to imagine them being easily replicable elsewhere. And while I'll point out the questions, concerns, red flags, and noteworthy absences that I stumbled upon in my research, we all have something to learn from what's going on in Ann Arbor.

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## MAKING RULES, RULING THE GAME

It has been said that s/he who makes the rules, rules the game. At the Neutral Zone, young people play a significant role in writing the rules, and they play a significant role in ruling the game. Stated in the organization's bylaws, up to 50 percent of the board of directors can be made up of young people. The Teen Advisory Council, composed completely of youth, is second in command — so the top two areas of leadership have major youth input. These leadership bodies oversee the main outreach and engagement tools at NZ — primarily the programs — that serve to attract a wide array of interested youth. In this way, the Neutral Zone deliberately provides a

full spectrum of involvement, from dropping in after school and playing pool to interest-specific weekly programs, to real leadership opportunities and organizational oversight.

The Neutral Zone's program offerings are almost overwhelming. Offering more than twenty programs; core program areas include education and mentoring, literary arts, visual arts, community leadership, and music performance and technology. Formats vary, from individual programs that happen every day after school to weeklong events in the summer.

The Neutral Zone draws a large portion of its young people by providing artistic opportunities — from a youth-owned recording studio to a digital arts lab. A drop-in space after school and Saturday night concerts in the B-side venue, which are booked, promoted, and hosted by teens, and a drop-in space after school, draw large youth crowds. There are also specific programs that split folks into caucuses and provide space for internal and focused dialogue. There is a group for young men of color, young women, LGBTQ youth, and more. And then they have programming that pulls everyone together. This year, the Neutral Zone hosted a weekend retreat with forty-two youth representing nearly every program at their space. As Emma Tolman put it, "I've never met a more motivated group of teens; it's out of this world."

And youth are more than just participants in programs; they're also the facilitators and the ones who evaluate the work. Emma told me she started running meetings at the age of 14; she was part of multiple trainings led by executive director John Weiss, and that there are a couple dozen others who also have the same skill sets.

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## THE TEEN ADVISORY COUNCIL

Obviously, high-level youth leadership is the cornerstone of high youth involvement at the Neutral Zone. This is best illustrated by the Teen Advisory Council (TAC). Composed of fifteen to twenty teens each year, this group provides for, contributes to, and approves programs. They fundraise for programs and grant their funds to special projects. As part of TAC, teens participate in retreats, leadership training, and community action projects.

TAC representatives form teams that serve as advocates to each of the programs. Their goal is to develop a relationship with each program to provide support and a link to the board of directors. As part of their role, they work with the program director to evaluate each program. Asking questions about

Echoes peforming at The Neutral Zone

what has worked and what hasn't, what TAC and the board might be able to provide to increase opportunities for success, and how to connect the programs in new ways — all of these responsibilities are taken on by a group of young people who facilitate meetings, set agendas, and review program documentation. It's really something.

But they don't stop there. TAC presents the entire evaluation to the board of directors each spring, with recommendations for future actions. In their forty-page annual program evaluation, information ranging from relationships in the community to demographics of the youth who come to the Neutral Zone (52 percent are female, 47 percent are male, and 1 percent are transgender; 40 percent are African-American, 36 percent are Caucasian, and 24 percent are Asian or Latino) is available. Every program is broken down, with survey results and samples, as well as qualitative and quantitative results in every area. Flat out — as the executive director of a growing youth-driven center in Cincinnati, I'm jealous. The bar has clearly been set high. Knowing that this information is an internal tool, as much or more than it is an external document serving as proof of sensational work, makes it even that much more impressive.

## STAFF AS ADVISORS TO TEENS

NZ's organizational chart shows sixteen staff members, but there are undoubtedly a large number of volunteers and young people that put in countless hours to make all these programs work. Staff are considered program advisors who support young people as facilitators in each of their programs. Staff support meetings with teen facilitators, help develop agendas before meetings, encourage reflection, and provide additional support when necessary.

When asked about how staff are taught the NZ's youth-led ideology, program director Lori Roddy explained, "We take professionals who want to share their work [in core program areas] with youth and then train the adults in youth development practices. We evaluate our staff through peer observations once or twice a year." One of the many things the staff is evaluated on is their success at managing youth and adult partnerships.

## SPACE: A COLLECTIVE DECISION

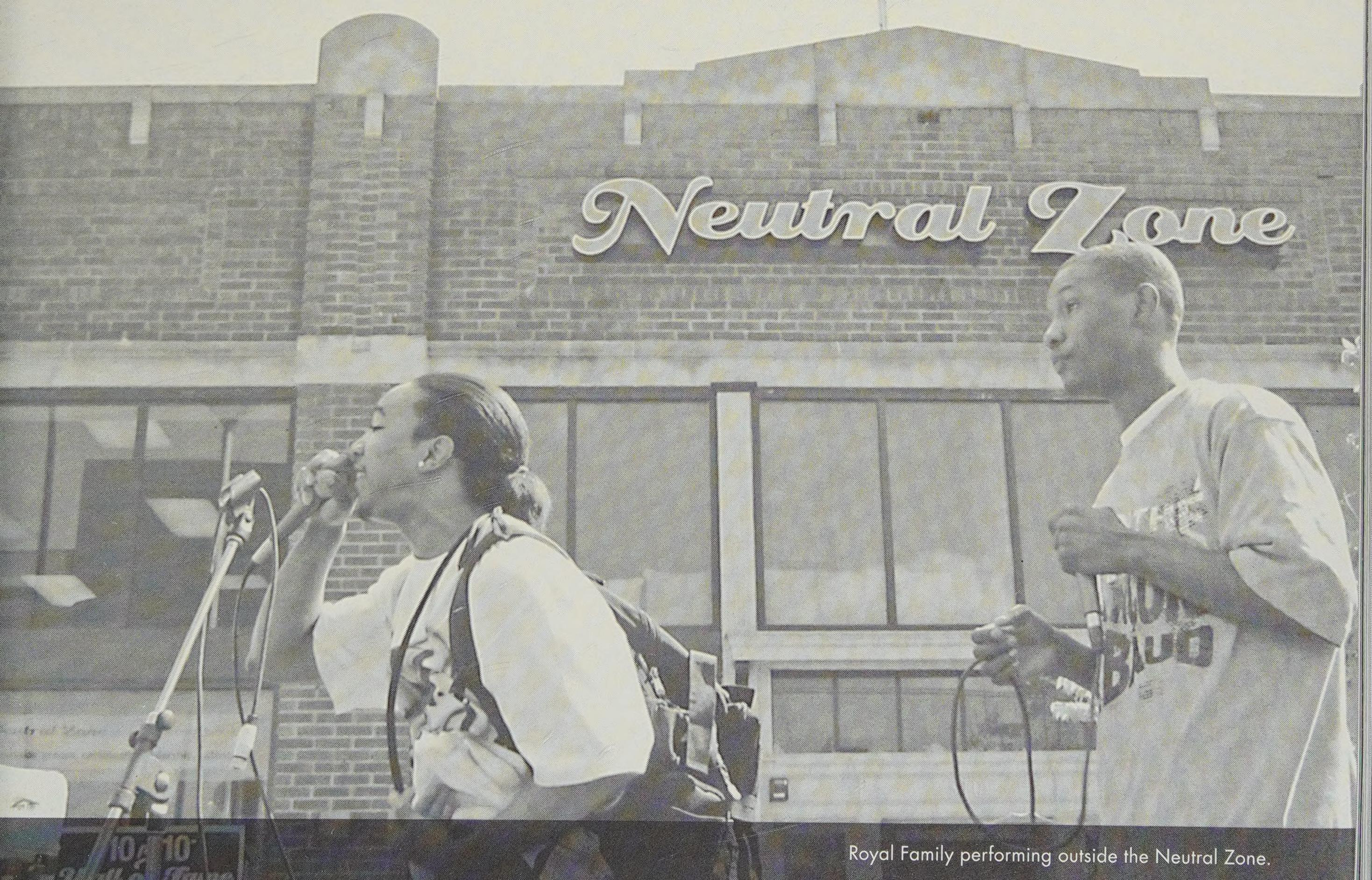
I was awed by the sheer amount of space available at the NZ (about 11,000 square feet!). The venue space itself is wide open, with couches and a piano tucked into the corner as you enter, and the stage, speakers, and lighting on the back wall. There's a developing greenroom and storage space off the stage as well. A pool table and more seating off to the left lead into the café, all of which is adjacent to the recording studio space.

Lori walks with me, along with music director Ingrid Racine, as they tell me about every square inch of the space — from what has already been built to what they envision happening in the future. Albert Berriz, the CEO of McKinley, a large development firm, co-chaired the capital campaign to buy and renovate a new downtown space with widespread community support. "Teen board members hosted a community forum to discuss the goals for the new space, its structure, and what it would look like," Lori explains. "In addition, there were two teens who were part of the building committee to check out other youth spaces, meet with the architects, and ensure the space was a reflection of the teen interests."

## ANN ARBOR VS. THE REST OF THE WORLD

The Neutral Zone has crossed enough T's and dotted enough I's for me to say confidently that it is a top-notch organization. What they have done is truly impressive, and after talking to the young people who make it happen, I'm sure most folks would agree. Still, some questions were left in my mind.

How much time does the Neutral Zone spend thinking bigger? Yes, bigger. When digging into their philosophy on leadership development, it seems pretty clear that this concept is related primarily to the skills and abilities of individuals. It's true that they have participated in some community organizing — for example, they are currently working to build a coalition of gay-straight alliances in their area to implement a school climate survey. This climate survey will be a tool for change as youth meet with school officials and teachers to implement new practices for LGBTQ youth. But I was left wondering about things such as: Do people get involved in local, state, or national politics? Are youth encouraged or supported




Royal Family performing outside the Neutral Zone.

to do community-organizing or civic-engagement work that has a power analysis? Is there an end goal (for example, reduction of the Ann Arbor dropout rate, improved economic opportunities for the city's poor, providing a support network for inner-city Detroit organizations that are dealing with the aftermath of white flight)?

At the organization I cofounded in Cincinnati, we want to develop individuals, but we also want to address systemic problems in order to improve the lives of the youth we work with in the long term. And while it's clear that Ann Arbor's systemic problems are different from those of the third-poorest city in the United States, does the Neutral Zone have a long-term vision and comprehensive understanding of its place in the world?

Don't get me wrong: in my opinion, it's a major accomplishment to get to the point where these kinds of big-picture questions are even worth thinking about. And I'd trade my long-term vision for their annual program evaluations any day, because they don't appear to have gotten ahead of themselves. But with such a short yet storied history, and such a bright and promising future, I think they're up to the challenge of seeing if they can take the next steps toward greatness.

*Gavin Leonard is a cofounder of Elementz: The Hip-Hop Youth Arts Center, in Cincinnati, Ohio, and the Ohio state director of the Center for Progressive Leadership. He is a board member of the League of Young Voters and the LYV Education Fund, and has served on the advisory committees of Wiretap and the All-ages Movement Project. He believes that building power to make change starts with strong community-based relationships.*

# THE NEUTRAL ZONE'S YOUTH LEADERSHIP *IN ONE PAGE*

**What's Worked:**

Building strong networks of support that range from youth communities to local power players. • Thorough program evaluation that involves young people. • Creating real ways for young people to have institutional power, making sure opportunities for youth leadership are created and implemented at every step.

**Issues:**

Because it's primarily a youth center, the NZ has had a hard time getting the attention of the music industry and getting good shows, but even this tide is starting to turn. • Their drop-in program is primarily people of color, but at high levels of the organization percentages drop. Also, they have a disproportionately large number of middle- and upper-income people in positions of power. They're highly aware of these issues, and let's be real — it's an affluent town, with a lot of white people.

**The Ann Arbor Factor**

Ann Arbor was one of the white-flight destination areas during the mass exodus of Detroit. The town has a high level of income and education, a population that is 75 percent white, and median a income that is 50 percent higher than Cincinnati's. • As far as being able to replicate their work, it's hard to match their highly and specifically educated staff. With the University of Michigan youth and community organizing master's program next door, the NZ gets to research, theorize, and workshop their ideas and hire staff directly from the program. Such like-minded degree programs aren't available in every town, though it's good to note how useful it can be to link up with a university program. • Don't fake the funk — with Motown next door, funk still holds a special place in everyone's musical taste. Get down, get down!


IV
DEMOCRATIZE it
YOURSELF

CHAPTER FOUR

# DEMOCRATIZE IT YOURSELF

## Organizational Structures

*The fact that they divide us should be enough to unite us*
*We are the world so boys and girls let's all collaborate*
*'Cause when we play together we won't notice the bad weather*
*Like flashlight tag when it's real cold or kickball in the rain*

Kimya Dawson • "Singing Machine"

### OUR ORGANIZATION COULD BE YOUR LIFE

In 2001, at a city council hearing in Seattle deciding whether or not the Vera Project would receive city funding that could make or break the project, Laura Wells stood up to testify. Laura is the mother of Dan, who was one of the first high school students to become deeply involved with running the organization as a volunteer and member. Dan's story illustrates the power of participatory organizational structures, especially as they pertain to leadership of youth not otherwise engaged in their surroundings

"I don't know how many of you [remember being] a teenager or live with a teenager, but I'll tell you a couple really astounding things about my teenager. He turned 19 in September and for his birthday, he asked his grandmother and other relatives to make contributions to the Vera Project instead of giving him gifts. He took a two hour bus ride up here ... to be here tonight in support of the Vera Project. And most astonishingly, I have seen this kid get up at

Artwork • Andy Ristaino

8:00 on a Sunday morning to get a bus to go to a Vera meeting by 9 o'clock. Now, I have never been able to get him out of bed before noon on a Sunday, and they did. Now, he wants to pursue a career in social work and I attribute that career goal to his involvement in the Vera Project."

For almost two years, Dan didn't miss a member meeting and raised about $200 from friends and family members at his birthday gathering to give to Vera. Even after he moved an hour away to go to college, he took the bus to volunteer at shows. His circle of friends grew to include other Vera members who went to different schools. He started bands with them and eventually started putting on shows in his college town. Dan was a one-of-a-kind guy, but his story is one that's shared by lots of young people. One week, by chance, they go to a show or meeting at a music organization, and the next week they move in.

At the city council meeting, Laura's testimony raised the question of how an organization could get a seemingly unmotivated teenager to become a shining star of volunteerism and philanthropy. That was great for Vera, of course, and very milkable for grant proposals, testimonies, and presentations, but ultimately the explanation was really straightforward. Dan and others like him *are* Vera — the participatory structure makes it so.

Dan's experience and Laura's testimony made it clear that Vera's self-governance structure was at least as important as the shows themselves. Laura wasn't talking about the importance of Dan having entertainment or somewhere to hang out, but about the importance of him building and investing in something — an organization, a community, and a place where he could have a say. "These kids are learning to be volunteers and to work together toward a common goal, to accept differences and be active members of their community," she explained.

Because so many community music organizations are committed to grassroots and DIY ethics, they often choose to build these sorts of structures even though most institutions in our culture, such as schools, government, and even families, are hierarchical. To get more familiar with different ways of running organizations, we'll first look at the basics of building organizations from the ground up and then study a participatory organizational model in action at the 924 Gilman Street Project.

## WHAT QUALIFIES AS PARTICIPATION?

Since that public hearing in 2001, the talk of participation has exploded, thanks in large part to technology and the internet. Between MoveOn, YouTube, MySpace, and Facebook, over 100 million people are campaigning, restructuring media and art, and building networks through participatory opportunities.

All of these organizations — offline, online, for-profit, non-profit, social, political, religious, or commercial — understand that offering chances to participate builds a deeper investment among constituents in whatever is being promoted. And while it's good that we have more opportunities to vote, speak up, connect with people, or choose our favorite pop idol, these experiences just scratch the surface of participation. Making a comment on someone's profile or bantering on blogs doesn't necessarily equip us with the skills to negotiate or practice communication geared toward problem solving and action. When we rate a movie on Netflix or vote on the sexiest barista for a weekly newspaper, we don't see how the system works or have any say in its design.

Deciding to build a participatory organizational structure is like signing up for a crash course in democracy, communication, economics, and organizing. How much participation to ask (or allow, or demand) of members or constituents is determined by leaders' decisions about what governance, organizational, and decision-making models to use. These are the elements that make up your organizational structure.

## GOVERNANCE

Governance is a part of every entity whether there's one person in charge or a group of people who decide everything by consensus. Governance is merely the structure your organization uses to make decisions about how you will get your work done. Governance can also have a range of formality. Sometimes, decision-making processes are merely implied, while other times there are piles of documents (even if they are rarely read) that explain a group's inner workings.

If you're an individual who puts on shows of your choice and have employees, interns, or contractors to help you, your governance structure is pretty straightforward — you make all the decisions and all the responsibility falls on you. Members of collectively run spaces, on the other hand, share the

decision-making power and the responsibility that accompanies it.

In the United States, the longest-standing youth music organizations all have more participatory structures — ABC No Rio in New York (founded in 1979), the Che Café in San Diego, California (1980), AS220 in Providence, Rhode Island (1985), and 924 Gilman Street in Berkeley, California (1986) — as do many newer organizations, cafés, bookstores, bike shops, and infoshops that make up the vital noncommercial infrastructure of the country.

●

## ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURES

Again, it's safe to say that culturally, we're used to structures where one person calls the shots and the power trickles down from there. But because so many music communities are defiant by design, it makes sense that they would turn this model upside down or try to do something else with it.

The most common antihierarchical structure is a collective. A collective is a group of people who come together to do something with equal decision-making power. A collective can have open or closed membership — meaning that anyone can join, there is a process for becoming a member, or they may not allow new members at all.

Generally, you hear about collectives being relatively small groups of people, like bands or affinity groups.

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## DECISION-MAKING OPTIONS

While you can build an organization that looks participatory in form, your decision-making methods determine a lot about the participatory culture of your organization.

The spectrum of how much participation is required in different decision-making styles looks something like this:

*Executive Model.* One person calls all the shots or appoints other people to make decisions, like the one-person promoter model.

*Simple Majority.* More than half of the members of the governing body must approve a proposal in a simple majority vote for it to go into effect. Using simple majority is a fine way to deal with smaller decisions that need input but don't affect everyone.

*Two-Thirds Majority.* Two-thirds of the members of a

# MOVING TOWARD CONSENSUS

Consensus is the most democratic way to get things done but, unfortunately, it's a process that we tend to have the least amount of knowledge about. Because there are few opportunities in which we get to facilitate and participate in egalitarian decision-making processes, it's not always the most honed tool in our box. Its also fairly misunderstood. Coming to consensus isn't supposed to be about making everyone have exactly the same opinion, but to make proposals to solutions that have the best thinking behind them. The process does challenge autonomy, making individuals take into consideration the needs and opinions of one another in order to find points of unity and compromise.

Consensus is definitely not for everyone and can't happen effectively unless everyone is committed to the process. It may be something that your organization moves toward over time. Even without using consensus as your organization's decision-making method, understanding how to move toward overall agreement before taking a vote or using another method is a good process tool.

Quick reads on consensus and democratic decision-making processes are listed in our online resources section.

governing body must approve a decision for it to go into effect.

*Consensus Minus One.* The entire group must agree in order to have something move forward, but one person cannot block consensus.

*Consensus.* Everyone must be in agreement. People can choose to stand aside, but if one person blocks, the proposal must be dropped or amended. This is usually used for big changes, like an amendment to bylaws.

## WHAT IS BEING GOVERNED?

Since we're talking music, let's use the example of a band. The things that a band has to make decisions about are:

- Songwriting, song parts, or structure
- Practice space, times, and format
- Record production, including what label, engineer, and studio to use
- Tour stops, length of tours, and other bands to tour with

Most likely, all these decisions are made by consensus (meaning everyone agrees rather than votes) in informal conversations. As the band gets more established and successful, has more people involved in its business (such as booking agents, publicists, and managers), and has more complicated decisions to make, this process should become more formalized so that it's possible to keep working together even when ideas and opinions diverge. They probably don't need a ballot system, but at least an agreement that everyone will be consulted before big decisions are made.

In the case of an organization, the decision-making trajectory is very similar. It might start out with participants who are able to make decisions together easily because they're on the same page; then, with time, it becomes necessary to create more structure.

In other words, while informal, organic decision making can work brilliantly for a while, over time, questions like "How do we make a decision about this?" or "Who gets to make the decision?" will inevitably emerge.

Things that people make group decisions about are:

- The purpose and work of the organization
- Who does what jobs
- Where the organization will be located

- Who will be on the board or staff and what the roles and responsibilities of those individuals are
- Where the money will come from and how it will be spent
- Who the organization will form partnerships with
- How to deal with conflict and crisis both internally and externally

## DECISION-MAKING BODIES

Depending on the size and values of your organization, your governance structure can have one decision-making body (like a band); it can have two (like a union with membership and a board of directors); or it can have as many as there are different areas to govern. ABC No Rio in New York, for example, is a building that houses several different collectives. Each collective oversees a certain program — one organizes the concerts, while another curates art shows, etc. — and the building itself operates as a nonprofit with a separate board of directors.

Here are some examples of decision-making groups that might exist within your organization.

### Membership

Many truly DIY spaces are simply run by one group of members who work together as volunteers to take care of everything: Charm City Art Space in Baltimore, Maryland; Division Avenue Arts Cooperative in Grand Rapids, Michigan; and 924 Gilman. Other organizations have a membership structure as one of their governing bodies. Membership implies that participants have voting rights. At the Vera Project, members make up several committees that oversee programs, sponsorship and partnership decisions, and volunteers.

### Board of Directors

The board is in charge of guiding the organization, and is legally and financially responsible for it. Boards often form different committees, such as finance, fundraising, board development, and others as necessary. At many community music organizations, the board of directors is not like a traditional board, but is rather made up of volunteers who do everything a staff would do at other nonprofits. Because boards often end up with the most responsibility and power in nonprofits, a lot of attention is paid to how to develop and grow them.

### Staff

Staff members are in charge of the day-to-day activities of an organization. Because they have the most time invested in the

organization, they also usually end up being the ones who guide the planning and evaluation processes. Lead staff members are usually hired and fired by the board and have no board voting power which balances the power they accumulate from holding the most organizational knowledge.

**Advisory Bodies**

Advisory committees or boards are usually filled with people who have insight and expertise to offer, but maybe not the time or energy to be a full-blown board member. Organizations that are housed within a government agency or larger nonprofit often set up an advisory committee or youth advisory committee to bring a participatory element into an otherwise hierarchical structure. Advisory bodies usually have no voting rights or decision-making power.

**Mixed Bags**

In the world of grassroots music and arts organizations, there are truly no two models that look exactly the same or have the same names for governing bodies. An organization usually starts off with one group of people working together on everything, and then branches grow as there is more work and it becomes diversified. This is how the Vera Project's organizational structure evolved until five years in, when we were trying to draw the organizational chart and could barely make sense of it. After a lot of mapping and defining, Vera came up with several ways to explain the organization's structure.

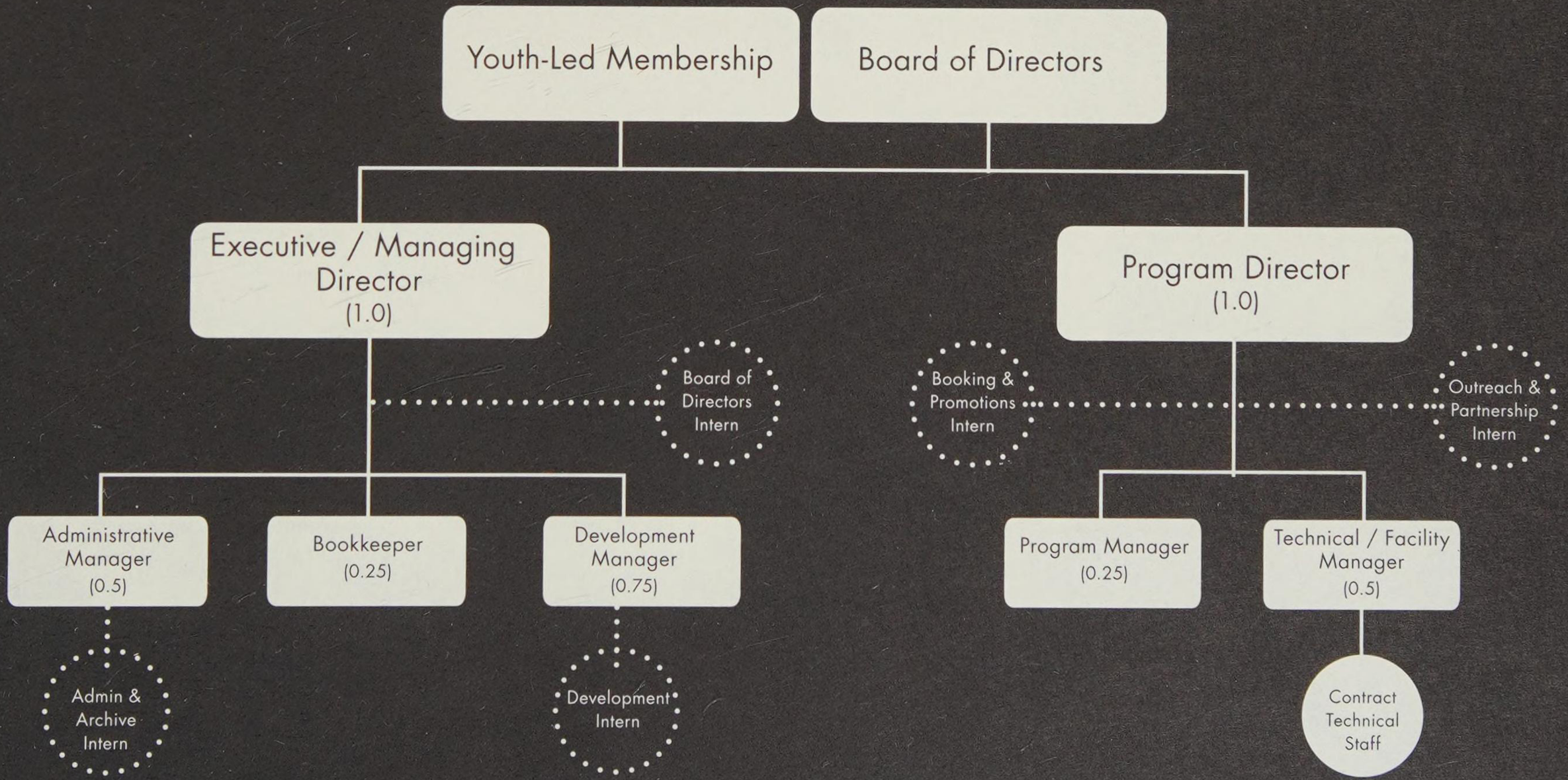
If you have more than one decision-making body, it's important to clarify each one's role and the ways they communicate with one another.

Though the conventional nonprofit model — with a board that full of luminaries with financial connections, a staff that's coordinates and implements the bulk of the work, and volunteers that fill in the gaps — is the most familiar and efficient, this doesn't mean it's a perfect model. Sometimes it seems like a setup for overworked staff to be steamrolled by a board with all the decision-making power or for staff members to use their authority to disregard important volunteer and community input. This is why some radical and newer organizations reject and redesign the standard nonprofit model. If you're starting from scratch, you have some creative freedom.

## PUTTING IT ON PAPER

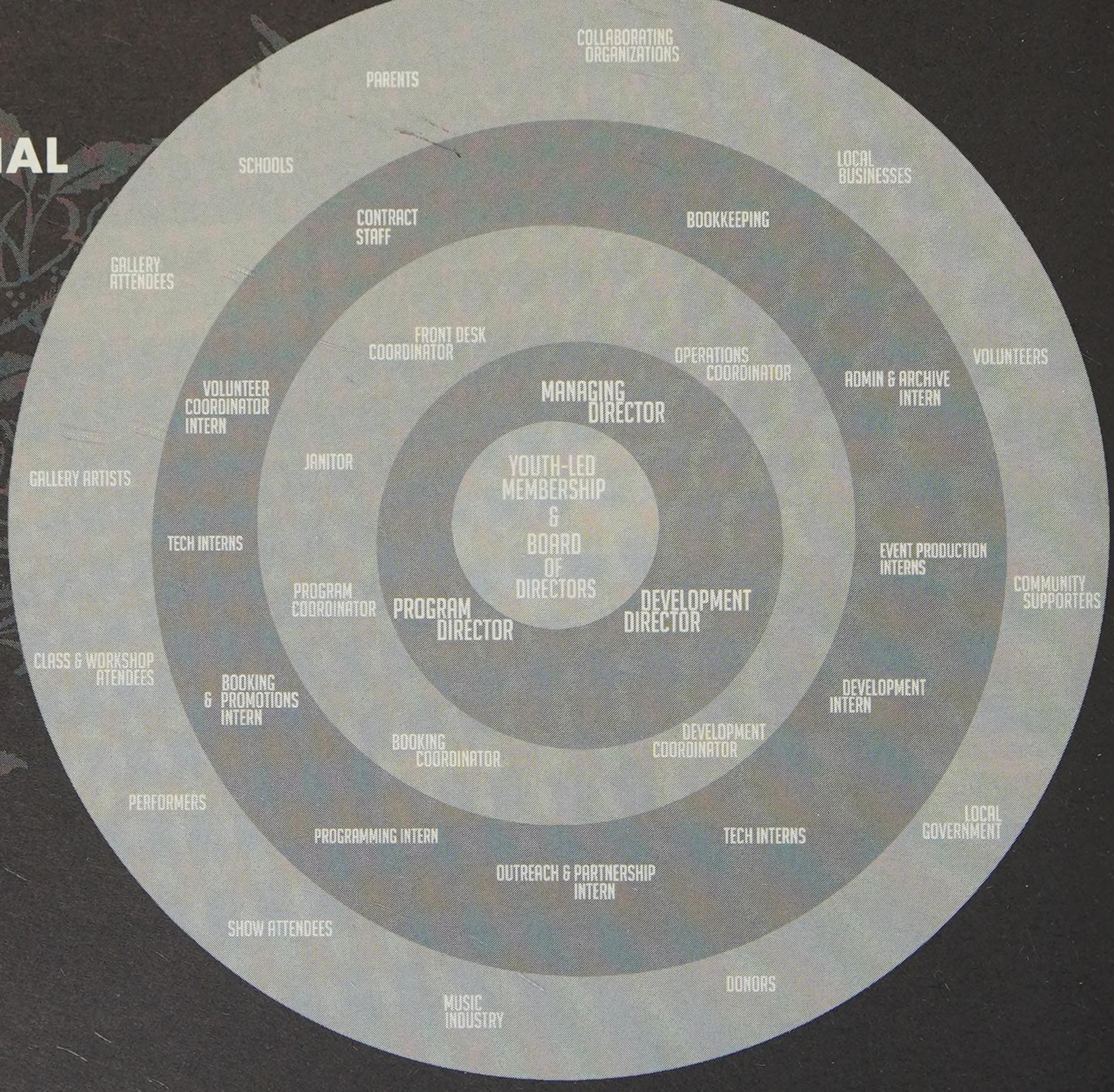
# SAMPLE ORGANIZATIONAL CHART

Courtesy of the Vera Project



# SAMPLE ORGANIZATIONAL CHART

Courtesy of the Vera Project



The first step in designing your governance structure is to state what it is — on paper. This could be your mission statement, charter, or manifesto document. Should you choose to go the nonprofit route, you will also have to evolve this into your bylaws. Bylaws are essentially the constitution of your organization.

For folks not interested in the meat of participation, you can fake your way through writing bylaws, but in the long run, these rules define who has the power to start, stop, or change your organization. It is in your bylaws that governing bodies and decision-making models are defined.[9]

## LEGAL STATUS

Because many community music organizations tend to ride the lines between art and industry, business and charity, participation and protest, there are a variety of statuses to choose from as far as the IRS is concerned.

### Off the Radar

The majority of DIY or grassroots groups have no status at all, chosen intentionally or unintentionally because they have limited capacity to formalize. A well-known group on the East Coast, for instance, operates as a collective and has raised hundreds of thousands of dollars for political and social causes through benefit shows in the past 20 years, without ever filing even one piece of paper with the IRS.

### The "Not-for-Profit" For-Profit

This means that your legal status is "for-profit" but you aren't making any money. You can be not-for-profit without filling out any nonprofit paperwork or setting up a board. Plenty of all-ages spaces are set up as for-profits that either lose money or break even. The Smell in Los Angeles, for instance, is a long-standing not-for-profit all-ages venue.

### Nonprofit Fiscal Sponsorship

Getting a fiscal sponsorship means you ask another organization with a similar mission to yours to loan their tax ID number to you so you can apply for grants and give donors tax write-offs. It also means that the organization has to include your budget in theirs and do your financial reporting. Because this is a significant amount of administrative work, it is common for the organization to take a cut of your income (between 1 and 15

9 • Sample bylaws can be found in our online resources section at allages.net/manualfesto

# LEGAL STATUS

## OFF THE RADAR

**Legal Status:** None • **Characteristics/Examples:** Lone ranger promoter, affinity group (usually short-term)

### PROS

Can happen spontaneously • Is flexible • Is untraceable • Can be more creative about use of space and what is presented • Barely any overhead • Can make a scene or event feel more special or exclusive • Participants are more invested • As Todd P, a DIY promoter in New York says, it takes the "transaction" feeling out of a live music experience

### CONS

You could get caught • Penalties are much worse if you do stuff that involves minors • Accessibility is limited for a variety of reasons; for instance, there is greater risk of jail time for having illegal events or tax evasion if you are poor or not white • You could get shut down at any time (even mid-show) and have to cancel months of commitments • Promotion is limited

## THE "NOT-FOR-PROFIT" FOR-PROFIT

**Legal Status:** Corporations, sole proprietorships, LLCs, or cooperatives • **Characteristics/Examples:** Collectives without nonprofit status, one or two people with an inclination toward charitable endeavors and no desire for nonprofit hassles

### PROS

You have the benefits of being legit without all the hassle of nonprofit paperwork • Because there is less scrutiny and reporting, it's easier to use cash instead of invoices and checks • Less administration • You don't necessarily have to have a board • You have far fewer political limitations

### CONS

It's hard to get donations even though you aren't making money — this especially sucks if you are trying to get donated PA equipment or other in-kind donations • Similarly, people are more apt to volunteer and get involved with official nonprofits, even if the difference is merely perception • You have to pay tax on all the income you report

# PROS & CONS

## NONPROFIT

**Legal Status:** Independent 501(c)(3), or fiscally sponsored • **Characteristics/Examples:** Groups with a long-term goal of establishing a consistent space or long-lasting organization, process junkies

### PROS

You don't have to pay federal tax on any income you report, and often there are many other tax breaks • It inherently requires you to think long-term • You can apply for grants and get donations • There is a board to help with the work (hopefully!) • You make so little money that you don't feel guilty about getting paid to do what you love • You are legit and transparent

### CONS

The application process and ongoing management is expensive and mind-numbing • Your political activity is limited (at least as far as partisan affiliations and endorsement of candidates) • You may come under a lot of public scrutiny • Nonprofit administration is not sexy or hip • You must have an uncanny love of fundraising

## GOVERNMENT AGENCY OR PROGRAM OF AN NGO

**Legal Status:** Government agency or program of larger 501(c)(3) • **Characteristics/Examples:** Teen center, program of parks and recreation, community center, YMCA or Boys and Girls Club

### PROS

Less fundraising pressure • No board necessary • Facility often provided • Can be networked to use other city resources like parks, equipment, etc. • There is usually more stability • Parents and adults will be more likely to trust your organization • You can potentially reach a more diverse set of young people • You are supporting the idea that more government and NGO money should be spent on supportive, positive programs for teens and young adults instead of ones that criminalize them

### CONS

You have little say over your organizational structure or budget needs • Budget is static, if not always in danger of being cut • Space can often be unimaginative or sterile • It can be harder to reach young people who are averse to teen centers • Your outreach, marketing, flyering, and program choices have to be passed through agency approval processes • Your program's fundraising capacity is limited

percent). There are some nonprofits that are specifically set up just to incubate start-up nonprofits and to be their fiscal sponsors. Those organizations are great to work with because they usually provide good financial statements, can help you get liability and health insurance (if you have staff), often offer advice and technical assistance, and can help you to appear more legit, but they usually take a much higher percentage of your income.

**Nonprofit**

The term "nonprofit" refers to organizations that file a certain amount of paperwork so they can get tax breaks. The majority of community music organizations I have talked to have gone this route.

There are at least two hoops to jump through to become a nonprofit:

*State.* This is a relatively painless process that usually costs between $25 and $50, though it means that you have to come up with bylaws and have at least three officers (or board members).

*Federal.* The federal nonprofit status — usually you'll hear "501(c)(3)" associated with it — refers to the section of the tax code that gets your organization out of paying income tax and allows people to make tax-deductible donations. The process for getting your own 501(c)(3) is long and expensive. It usually takes a couple of months to do the application, it costs about $600 and possibly additional lawyer's fees, and you will have to wait awhile — anywhere from a few months to a year or more — to get your official letter from the IRS. Because the process is so drawn-out, you should consider getting a fiscal sponsor when you are just getting going, either to test your ideas or to allow you to fundraise as you await your own nonprofit status.

If you're unsure about going through the hassle of the federal process and can't find a fiscal sponsor, you can still file as a nonprofit at the state level and thus make yourself eligible for local tax exemptions. Unfortunately, you will have to file federal tax returns and pay income tax.

**For-profit**

If you want to be a legitimate for-profit entity that makes money

# THE BARE BONES LEAP TO LEGAL

If you're ready to take the steps you need to become legal, the easiest thing to do is to register with your state's business licensing department.

On the internet, go to your state government's homepage and look for the Department of Licensing. You are looking for the paperwork to become a recognized business (LLC, sole proprietorship, or corporation). Then, you will receive a business identification number, unless you are registering as a sole proprietor, in which case you will register with your social security number.

Once you have the state business identification number, you can get a business license for operating in your city (if necessary) and start to enjoy the benefits of being sort of legit, like the ability to get real insurance or to set up wholesale accounts for concessions or T-shirt sales. In some states, you will also have to register as a reseller.

and isn't selling booze or $20 to $25 tickets, you've got some major challenges ahead of you. The only venues in the country I know of that are kind of making it commercially while still being part of the all-ages indie scene are in Salt Lake City, Utah, or similar places where the liquor laws are so prohibitive that it's actually easier to run a club without booze.

Same goes with record labels. Most small record labels are not-for-profit (intentionally or not), and there are a handful of official nonprofit labels like Youth Movement Records that use the record production process to achieve community goals alongside their work of artist development and releasing albums.

### Government Agencies and Other Non-Governmental Organizations

Going the route of being a program of another agency is another option for establishing an all-ages organization, and it's one that lets you skip having to figure out some of this administrative stuff. This might be an interesting thing to do if there is already an established youth-accessible space (e.g., a teen center or Boys and Girls Club) that you want to pilot music programming in. In the short term, there are many clear benefits of doing this, like name recognition and administrative support, but there are also serious challenges to consider. For example, changes in the priorities of your local government could leave you with no budget, and things like adding a staff position and making outreach materials, which could be handled quite simply in a small nonprofit, will have to go through eighteen layers of approval. In other words, there's more bureaucracy, and you won't have as much control over your organization.

## PARTICIPATORY-NESS

You can create a participatory culture with any legal status and organizational structure, though clearly certain structures are more conducive to it (e.g., collectives that make decisions by consensus). When organizations are more participatory, people like Dan (the guy at the beginning of the chapter), myself, and anyone who spends time with their head in between headphones or stacks of amps get to feel the satisfaction of having a say in things, to learn how to effect change while working with a group of diverse personalities, and to move our culture toward cooperation through participating in something we love.

# PAYING PEOPLE ABOVE THE TABLE

As soon as you decide to start paying people, you have two options. The first is to pay people as independent contractors. This works for people who do very specific tasks, like being sound engineers or poster designers. In order to put people on payroll and give them more encompassing jobs, you must file for a Federal Employee Identification Number (FEIN) and pay payroll taxes. Payroll taxes are the ones that come out of your paycheck; there's also a share that is paid directly by employers. For instance, if you decide to pay someone $25,000 a year, it will cost your organization an additional 10 to 15 percent of $25,000 in taxes. For me, the process of figuring out how and when to file payroll taxes was the hardest part of doing taxes. Ask for help from someone else who has a small business or nonprofit, and make some calls to the IRS to get all your ducks in a row. You might want to call on the help of a local accountant who works with small businesses, or a company that specializes in handling payroll.

# PARTICIPATORY STRUCTURE PROS AND CONS

## PROS

- **More Brains and Bodies.** Putting on a show or running a record label, especially if you choose to go legit, is a lot of work. There are many moving parts that happen before a sound check and after a record is released.
- **Harder to Run, but Built to Last**. An organizational structure not reliant on any one person has a better chance of lasting. When only one or two people have all the responsibility, there's a higher risk of burnout, and it can be very hard to keep things going when those people leave, since most of the knowledge about how the organization works leaves with them.
- **Honing Our Skills For Collaboration.** As Margaret Mead famously said, "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed people can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has."

## CONS

- **The Time It Takes.** It's true, trying to get input from people takes time, and there usually isn't enough time to have everyone involved in every decision. It's important to allow some decisions to be made informally and clarify which ones require participation.
- **Staff Roles and Power Dynamics.** It's hard to transition from being an all-volunteer organization to having a staff person without levels of investment shifting. They just do. People who are more invested tend to have more power in an organization. Equity in decision making will shift unless procedures are created to keep power dynamics in check.
- **Growing Pains.** Starting out as a collective and growing in programs and numbers can also make it difficult to figure out how to maintain a participatory culture. If you have to raise more money, there are more deadlines, and decisions become more urgent. The time to involve everyone in key decisions dwindles. How much growth is good and how much is harmful to an organization's mission is a topic for every organization to debate.

## Grounds for Participation

If you are creating a participatory organization or you want to move toward being more participatory, here are some ideas to chew on:

*Transparency.* Is it clear how people can participate and make decisions in your organization? Participants should be able to understand how they get involved, what roles and responsibilities their involvement entails, and what the process is when there is conflict.

*Equality.* Do you value all decision makers' participation equally? Why or why not? If you are set up as a membership organization or a collective, one person or constituent group shouldn't have more or less power than another.

To go one crucial step further, striving for equality in our organizations means we accept that we exist in an extremely inequitable society and therefore must adopt systems that help us keep dominant cultural norms in check and work to keep things like racism, sexism, ageism, homophobia, and ableism out of our processes. This takes real effort and (un) training.

*Room for Autonomy.* Does your group process steamroll diverse opinions? Creating a participatory organization is not the same as encouraging groupthink, or a pack mentality where everyone has to be the same and go along with whatever the group does. Building participatory organizations should create opportunities for individuals to excel and enjoy success along with the groups they are a part of. If one person's idea isn't appropriate for the group, that should not stop that person from pursuing it separately, or result in anyone being pushed out of the group.

## Conflict Resolution

So once you've got all of these things figured out and written down, and things are rolling, prepare for disaster to hit. Confidentiality is breached, someone gets hurt, a band says something unquestionably offensive onstage, or you get a grant from a tobacco company that leaves people feeling kind of dirty. There will be bad press, rumors, and hurt feelings — sometimes it's really painful and hard. Inevitable moments like these are part and parcel of why some people avoid process oriented groups, especially in a society where we are trained to do whatever we want to do and leave laws and enforcement to someone else. So, how to deal?

Smaller conflicts can usually be resolved with frank conversation and a focus on resolution for the greater good of the organization. Larger conflicts, however, bring to light larger questions:

- Is someone's personal safety at stake? How can you make sure that person's needs take precedence in the process?
- Is confidentiality an issue? Is it possible that unsubstantiated rumors could cause problems for someone or for your organization?
- What skills are needed to deal with the conflict? Who needs to be involved?
- Can and should this conflict be handled internally? Who can you ask for help?

Answering these questions can help you understand what the appropriate next steps are, whether it's a mediated venting session, a training, a policy rewrite, or calling for help.

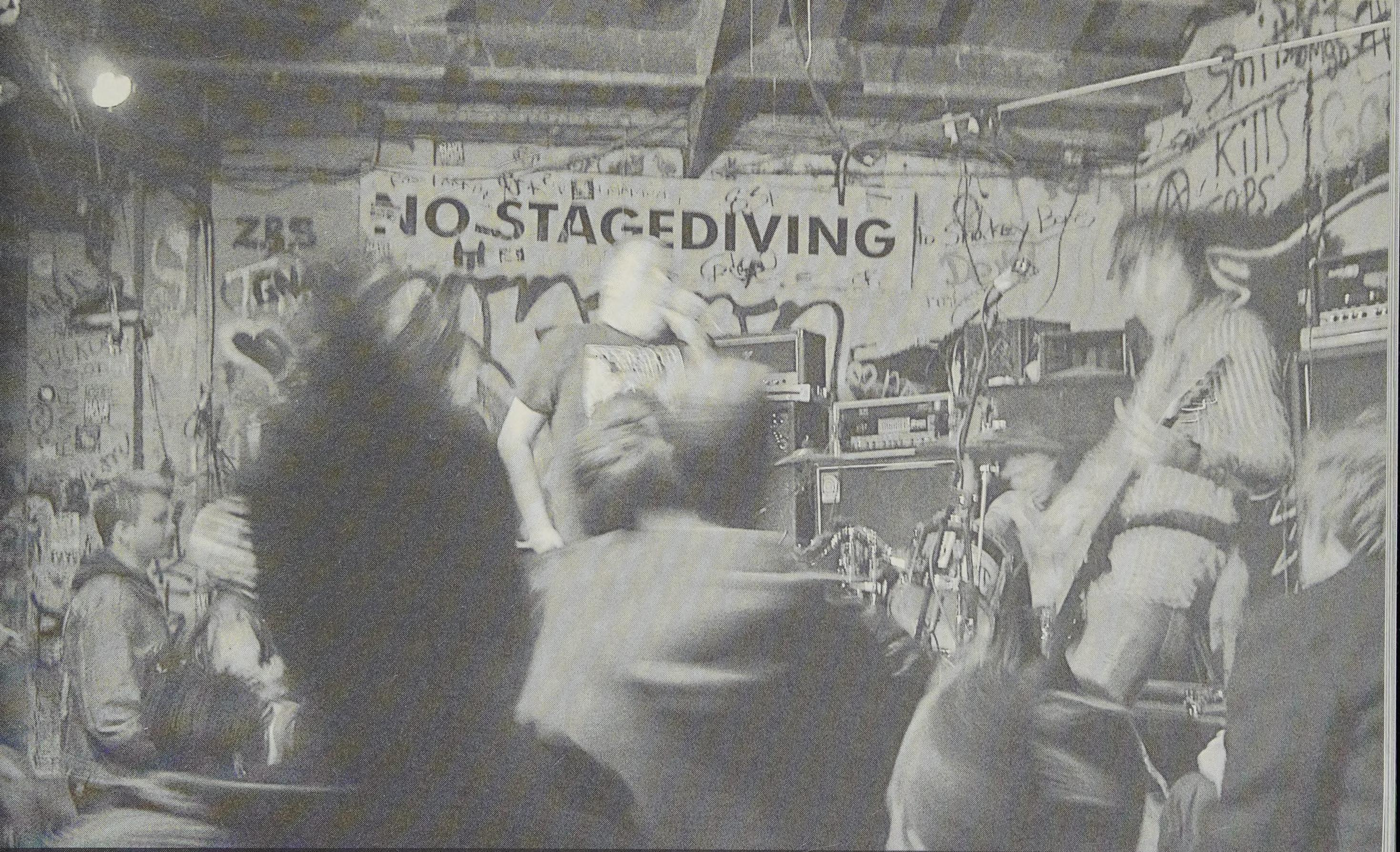
With that said, conflict isn't something you can or should want to avoid. It's something that's always happening whether we acknowledge it or not. Being in disagreement and having to negotiate differing opinions is how organizations get stronger, how more clarity is achieved, and how things change.



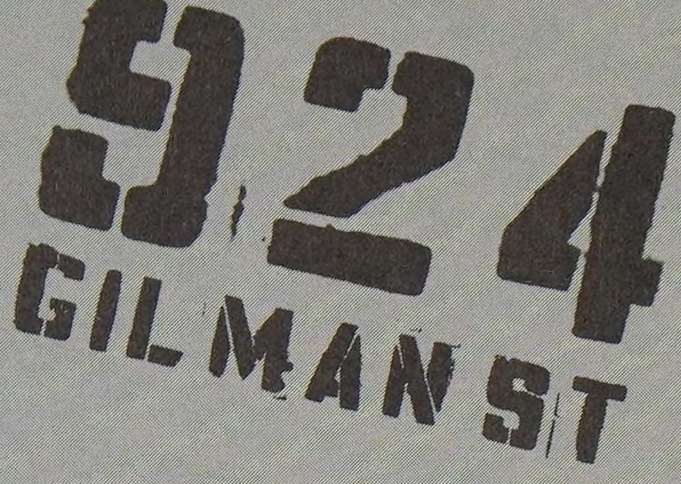
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## DEMOCRATIZE IT YOURSELF SPOTLIGHT

To see what it looks like to put these ideas in action, and to see how governance works when internal conflicts arise, we'll take a look at the 924 Gilman Street Project in Berkeley. When I asked youth music organizations around the country what organizations they considered as influences, Gilman was among the names that came up over and over again. That's partly because Gilman is one of the longest-running all-ages music organizations in the country, but, more importantly, the organization is known for working to erase the barriers between staff, participants, and performers at shows. Within the walls of their venue and within a musical genre that's known for having major issues with violence, sexism, and racism, Gilman is trying to carve out space for an inclusive and accountable community through its participatory forum.




Absolute Rulers at Gilman. Photo by Shannon Stewart.




# VITALS

**Located:** Berkeley, California • **Founded:** 1986 • **Organization Type:** Volunteer-run collective, fiscally sponsored • **Music Genre of Focus:** Punk and hardcore (or, in their words, "pop-punk and post-hardcore") • **Goings On:** Shows every Friday, Saturday, and occasionally Sunday; Narcotics Anonymous Meetings; members' meetings twice a month; non-show nights with movies and open mics; and café nights every first Thursday of the month for coffee, food, and hanging out • **Fees:** All shows are $5 to $7; there's a $2 membership that must be renewed annually. Gilman pays the two security people $40 minimum for small shows and 5 percent of the first $1,000 and 3.5 percent of anything over $1,000 on bigger shows. The rest of the money is split 50/50 with the bands. • **Where the Money Comes From:** Gilman keeps 100 percent of the membership revenue, and the rest of its income comes from the door receipts as laid out above. At the time of printing, Gilman was fiscally sponsored by Indy Arts and Media, so they can finally write grants and get donations. • **Founding Story:** Tim Yohannon and some folks from *Maximum Rocknroll*, a big punk zine, wanted to create a space that was a direct reaction to the typical punk venues that had bag searches, used pay-to-play structures, and attracted neo-Nazi skinheads. The original Gilman Street Project closed down on September 11, 1988, and was then reopened by new volunteers as the Alternative Music Foundation. • **Claims to Fame:** Membership structure, links to *Maximum Rocknroll*, making an anti-oppression stronghold in the punk community, as well as incubating artists and contributing to the rise of Green Day, Jawbreaker, Op Ivy, Rancid, Miranda July, and other East Bay superstars • **The Local Scene:** Gilman is located in West Berkeley and is the only all-ages venue serving the area. Kids come from Berkeley and the surrounding suburbs to see and volunteer at shows. Despite being overtly drug- and alcohol-free, Gilman is under scrutiny in its neighborhood by residents, local cops, and city officials. The working members of the club are constantly surveying and cleaning up the area within a one-block radius of the club, whether it's Gilman's patrons causing problems or not. Still, Gilman is under surveillance and has been threatened with lawsuits for several years. One of the nights I visited, plainclothes policemen were walking down the quiet street shining flashlights in all the cars parked nearby.

SPOTLIGHT:

# 924 GILMAN STREET Berkeley, CA

*By Shannon Stewart*

## "*YOU* ARE RESPONSIBLE FOR YOUR PARTICIPATION[10]"

Gilman's philosophy: Artists, patrons, and workers are all equally involved and important in events. If everyone present at a show feels responsible and invested in the event and in the space, then people will police themselves, events will feel accessible but intimate, and things that could never occur in a regular club will unfold.

When you first walk into the little warehouse in front of a canning shop on Gilman Street you might, like me, stand in the middle of the room sort of awkwardly and wait for someone to ask if they can help you.

And you will stand there for a while.

I did this the first and also the second time I went to a Gilman members' meeting. On my second visit, the back door was propped open to brighten up the otherwise dimly lit concrete space. The sun backlit people walking in and moving around me as if I were an inanimate object rather than a curious and semi-lost-looking person standing in the middle of the room. This is how it has been walking

10 • Because process is so important to this organization, here is how this spotlight was written: I went to two members' meetings. Former head coordinator Chris Sparks was approved as my main contact. He recommended that I talk to another former coordinator, Jesse Luscious, as well, so I did. I went to several shows and worked the door at one, talking to other volunteers and *members*. I also read a book and watched a documentary about the space (both titled 924 Gilman), and had Jesse and Ariel Awesome (another coordinator) do fact-checks and run the piece by members. I regret not being able to talk more of the founding crew, but I thank all these folks for their time and energy!

into most volunteer-run spaces — it's no one's job to greet you and help you feel like you fit in. No one is tasked with the job of encouraging you to participate. You have to do it yourself.

As I wondered who I should talk to about getting on the agenda for the meeting, some 20-year-old-looking guys clad in shirts screaming band names in scratchy fonts moved nasty couches around and disturbed the mice hanging out underneath. I flinched at the sight of the urban wildlife inside and was rewarded with a couple of knowing smirks. So much for trying to fit in.

People meandered in. A whiteboard was brought out and propped up against some chairs; written on it were all-caps agenda items like "BOOKING" and "SECURITY," with smaller items falling in line underneath. When the last person slipped in, twenty or so minutes into the meeting, we were twelve people: mostly white, mostly guys, and mostly wearing all-black clothing. As you might expect, one person was putting trucks on a new skate deck.

Ben, the facilitator, pushed his thick black glasses up the bridge of his nose and pulled a pen out of the front pocket of his plaid button-up shirt. "Okay, let's get started."

### The Culture of Opposition[11]

"Wait, are you a reporter?" Chris Sparks had asked me, interrupting himself mid-sentence, as we were chatting before the meeting. I had joined in on a conversation he was having with an older Gilman member, John Hart, about the current state of the club's fight with a neighbor who's trying to get them shut down. Representatives from Gilman have been in and out of city hall to make their case, backed by letters of support and a solid coalition of other supportive neighbors. After I explained the purpose of the book, Chris said, "Well, I'm curious to see what you say, because most people don't get this place right."

That attitude, whether it comes from resistance to outside perspectives or fear of documenting and thereby formalizing and ruining something as fleeting and organic as Gilman's story, is something that is echoed in just about everything that talks about Gilman. "Fuck the book" stickers littered the space in the early 2000s, when Brian Edge was putting together his participatory piece of documentation *924 Gilman: The Story So Far*, with seventy-eight stories of people whose lives meaningfully intersected with the organization.

11 • The phrase "culture of opposition" is taken from ABC No Rio's sign in front of their building on Rivington Street in New York City; ABC No Rio modeled their punk and hardcore matinees after Gilman.

## THE DEETS ON GILMAN'S PARTICIPATORY STRUCTURE

The systems that define the way Gilman is run today are the same ones that were set up in 1986 and then formalized when Gilman reopened in 1988. The club is focused on one kind of program, and therefore the organizational structure has everything to do with planning, promoting, and holding punk and hardcore events and keeping the facility open. And that's it.

### Membership

"The primary goal of Gilman Street is communication between the artists, volunteers, and patrons. Membership includes all aspects of that," Chris told me.

Everyone at Gilman has to be a member. According to the bylaws, you can either be a paying member or a voting member, so a person comes to a show and buys a membership card for $2 (which lasts for a year) and/or comes to a membership meeting, held on the first and third Saturday of the month at 5 p.m. Newcomers at membership meetings can participate in the first meeting, but they cannot vote until the second meeting. This rule exists to deter major organizational changes that could be instigated by a renegade posse of new people at one meeting. The more likely scenario is that it takes someone longer to feel comfortable exercising member rights than it takes to become a member and sit through one meeting.

### Leadership Positions within Membership

Of course, not everyone who comes to a show is willing to sit through meetings, clean the club, remove graffiti in the neighborhood, and do the work it takes to book, promote, and run the shows. Therefore, Gilman has a number of elected leadership positions. Officer positions exist more on paper to meet legal requirements than to handle the day-to-day operations of the club. "Staff" positions are unpaid volunteer jobs that entail more responsibility and some decision-making autonomy.

### Filling Volunteer Positions: "We Just Will"

There are a number of other positions that don't require as much training and are filled one hour before every show starts. These include four door staff (taking money, stamping hands, checking stamps, and selling membership cards), someone who works in

# 924 GILMAN STREET'S STRUCTURE

**Officers:** Officers at Gilman are elected annually. • **President:** The president is a title holder to fulfill legal obligations. • **Secretary:** The secretary is responsible for facilitating membership meetings. • **Treasurer:** Currently, this person oversees money handling, but there has not always been one. • **Staff:** All staff positions at Gilman are unpaid except for the security. • **Head Coordinator:** The head coordinator is the go-to person at Gilman. He or she is authorized to make any pressing decisions that can't wait for a members' meeting. • **Show Coordinators:** Show coordinators are in charge of managing events, including recruiting and overseeing volunteers every night and monitoring what's going on inside and outside of the venue. • **Head Booker:** The head booker is in charge of coordinating the booking committee and putting the final schedule together. • **Bookers:** The bookers answer the phones on Tuesday and Wednesday nights during booking hours, go through lyric sheets, and put the lineups together. • **Head of Security:** The head of security is in charge of scheduling the security crew for every show and dealing with any security issues that come up. • **Paid Security:** Security is the only paid position at Gilman because these folks "get punched from time to time." Security positions are never filled by hired guns, only by Gilman members. • **Head of Sound:** • The head of sound makes sure that there is someone to work the PA at every show. • **Stage Manager:** The stage manager makes the shows run on time by communicating with the bands about when they perform and how long their set is.

the store selling merchandise and snacks, and some volunteer security. Shows are split up into two shifts, so about ten volunteers are needed every night. New volunteers are trained on the spot; no forms are filled out.

On the night I volunteered, Shirley and Madison, high school sophomores and big fans of one of the bands, were working the door, while my friend Annie sold membership cards and I put my leg against a wall to block people from coming in without paying.

Gilman, like any volunteer-run space, has issues with filling volunteer positions. There are nights when one or two people are working the door, running sound, selling water and plunging the broken toilet for the four- or five-hour duration of the show.

At the time I was writing this piece, Gilman had just upped its nightly security team from two to six people to minimize any possible disturbances outside the club that could add fuel to neighbors' skepticism and anger.

"What if we can't get that many people?" a member asked in the lengthy security discussion at the meeting. Chris replied, "We want the right to have fucked-up, shitty shows that assholes are going to come to. It's not a question of whether or not we can get that many people here to do security. We just will."

**Meetings and Voting**

I knew before I wrote this that every major decision at Gilman is passed through membership. At the meetings, members consider new proposals and voice concerns about whether or not acts booked adhere to Gilman's anti-oppression values. People give updates and strategize about how to deal with noise complaints or drinking citations around the club.

After a few questions about my proposal, Mike asked if anyone "wanted to vote" on whether or not they approved of me writing about their organizational structure. Even though every decision has to go through membership, not everything is voted on, and in this case, no one piped up. Unless someone insists, decisions can be made without any yeas, nays, or hand-raising. A guideline as simple as that one struck me as such a good way to keep things moving, to prevent people from seeing every decision as precious and process-heavy.

In the case of a vote at Gilman, most approvals are made by a simple majority. Decisions to change the articles of incorporation or bylaws, or to elect officers, are made by a two-thirds majority.

While the decision-making process is very clear, who gets to be involved is somewhat murky. Gilman doesn't formally keep

track of who is a voting member, though Chris said that we tend to use our better judgment" in the case of making decisions without key people present. A quorum (the number of people who must be present for a vote) is nine members, There is no system for voting by proxy — voting by email, phone, or letter if you can't be present at a meeting. "Is any of this written down anywhere?" I asked.

"There's all kind of things that have been used for meeting notes, backs of flyers and whatnot, and most of it's garbage," Chris said. "Meetings come up, we talk about things that affect the club right now, we write them down, they go into effect, certain rules stand the test of time, certain rules are forgotten. I actually really like this. I like the system. There are basic rules, and then there are the little ones that change with the time. Just like the volunteers, just like the membership comes and goes, so do these little rules and traditions."

### Music and Booking

Madison and Shirley, the door duo, grabbed hands and made a break for the front of the room when their favorite band took the stage, temporarily abandoning their posts as Gilman gatekeepers.

I took in the audience in mild amazement. Coming from a scene in Seattle where you rarely see a group of more than thirty people gathering for local punk bands (and those people tend to be in their 30s), the fact that more than 100 people, most of whom were teenagers, were gathered in Berkeley that night to see relatively unknown punk bands was mind-boggling to me. My experience in booking had led me to think that this kind of punk wasn't necessarily dead, but it was way grown-up.

Logistically speaking, booking at Gilman is handled by a few members who have the time and the energy to do it. Generally, bookers work in different subgenres and negotiate who gets what dates. The head of booking nominates new bookers, who must be approved by a members' vote. It should be noted that the genres Gilman presents expand beyond punk and hardcore to include folk, metal, experimental, and industrial. The only explicit rules that govern booking decisions are these: no racism, no sexism, no homophobia, and no major-label bands. Bands that have not played at Gilman before must send in a lyric sheet before they'll be considered for a show.

924 Gilman. Photo by Shannon Stewart.



### Band Participation

Not unlike any other venue, bands that get booked at Gilman are expected to participate in events as performers, promoters, and crowd managers, but at Gilman more so than other venues, the expectation of artists to take responsibility of their shows is even more explicit. Everyone is a peer and expected to pitch in to make the event well-attended, fun, and safe.

Perhaps the most unusual part of band participation at Gilman is the process for payout. The bookers, stage managers, and/or head coordinator will make recommendations about who should get paid what amount based on draw and distance traveled. Bands then have a chance to negotiate with one another to finalize the amounts, and they try to reach consensus among all involved. If there's any disagreement, the final say rests with the head coordinator. While this sort of process happens frequently with bands that are touring together, at Gilman even bands who might not know one another are expected to come to consensus about money, and take into consideration other bands' needs along with their own. Outside the club you either hear praise for this collective approach, or mutterings that commence with something like, "It's a nice idea, but..."

## UNDER THE SURFACE: CONFLICT RESOLUTION AND SELF-GOVERNANCE

While the membership framework makes it sound pretty straightforward and easy, when you spend time with the organization, or turn the pages of *924 Gilman*, you'll encounter story upon story of how Gilman has struggled with incredible conflicts, from violent drunks and racist skinheads to intense internal schisms.

At a members' meeting years ago, a young attendee stood up and explained that he was raped by another person in the Gilman community. The event did not occur at Gilman, but it dramatically altered the feeling of safety at Gilman and within the local punk scene. The members' reactions varied wildly, from rage to disbelief, and threw them into an intense examination of where the borders of their self-governance lie. Accounts of the situation traveled all the way up the coast to Seattle, where the underground music community was also dealing with the reality of sexual violence within our scene.

Out of that situation, the Gilman membership developed and adopted this step-by-step dispute resolution process:

- In case of conflict, someone can ask either the entire membership or the facilitator (in person, in writing, or through a third-party representative) for a dispute resolution group.
- The membership will then appoint a dispute resolution group, after stating the strict code of confidentiality to potential volunteers.
- The dispute resolution group meets with the complainant to determine if there should be a Gilman dispute resolution process at all.
- If there should, they must decide whether that process should be based on mediation (if both parties agree) or fact-finding. If the issues are "too heavy or legally damaging to the club," the group may refer the complainant to an outside service provider.
- The dispute resolution group eventually returns to the membership to report back on whether there was mediation or a referral, or makes a recommendation to the membership on how to proceed.[12]

12 • Taken from the document "Dispute Resolution — Gilman Street Style."

Even the process of writing the dispute resolution policy brought out more conflict and debate about Gilman's values and ideas about outside authority figures. Some members were alienated and left the group, and others stayed and crossed their fingers that they wouldn't have to go through it again. For better or for worse, the process was clarifying and left Gilman members with a road map for how to deal with the next big problem that came up before it was too far along to protect identities or call for help from outside sources.

**Is Gilman "Open to Anyone"?**

In the documentary *924 Gilman*, a longtime volunteer says emphatically, "If anyone has a problem with Gilman, they can get involved and change it." And it's true. Though a lot of people complain about Gilman for a variety of reasons, you can't point a finger at any "them" in Gilman. It is not a static collective. That principle of "anyone can have a say" is why people build participatory organizations — to be flexible and responsive to the community.

"Has there ever been talk of opening up the club to different genres?" I asked Chris as he beat me to the punch of bringing up diversity at Gilman by calling it a bit of a "boys' club."

"There has been, and we have." He pauses for a while. "Have you been to the bathroom? It's fucking disgusting. We've tried to create a better environment, but we can't really fight the graffiti. When we have a show that's indie rock or hip-hop, [show attendees and artists] think it's pretty gross. We've made attempts to clean the place up, and it will last so long, and then we'll have a couple punk shows and everything gets peed on, written on — and so we're kind of stuck due to some core hygiene issues."

I went on to ask Chris if, in trying to address issues of accessibility, Gilman had any procedures (formal or otherwise) about how to account for who's participating in and leading the organization. "Putting a piece of plywood up at the front door saying those things ('no racism, no sexism, no homophobia, etc.') isn't going to change anything," he said frankly. "Actually getting people to make a stand to change those things is more difficult."

I thought about sitting in the members' meeting and noticing how the women present were not really participating, and how I watched a couple guys remove a woman from an appointed position without her requesting them to do so. (About a year later, I was happy to hear the tides were turning and many more women were at the helm.) After a few awkward moments, Chris repeated the mantra, "It's your responsibility to be involved, and that's the way it's always been."

To me, this seems to be the biggest problem with participatory organizations that are attempting to be "open" and democratically run, including Vera in Seattle. How open are they, actually?

As a white girl dressed in all black, with dyed hair, tattoos, and years of putting on punk and indie shows, I was still sort of intimidated by the vibes at Gilman. Because these small organizations are constantly stretched too thin, trying to seriously address issues of accessibility gets shuffled down the list of priorities.

When there is critique, overextended members tend to get defensive and fall back on the idea that the organization is "open to anyone" without acknowledging that there are a lot of barriers. I say this humbly, having watched myself and other Vera members do it when faced with legitimate feedback. The barriers range from ones that are intentionally created to keep mainstream music and adults from taking over, to the ones that are more subtle, such as genre-related aesthetics, to the ones that are omnipresent in all groups dominated by whiteness, maleness, middle-class-ness, and straightness.

### Politics and the Significant Other in Participation

Side conversations with other volunteers and the overall

sentiment of the book and documentary make clear a more straightforward reason for why Gilman isn't tackling social change or political issues in a more direct manner: because it's just a show venue. I see that attitude circulating throughout other community music spaces and programs as well. A lot of people are there for the music; to learn about production; or to become artists, booking agents, and sound engineers.

An interview with longtime volunteer Jesse Luscious, however, was centered on the club's relationship to local politics. "No one understands how much power you have if you can stay awake during zoning meetings," he said, explaining how his involvement in Gilman had everything to do with why he ran for Berkeley City Council in 2004. Logically, Luscious was also the person who found copies of bylaws and policies that I wasn't sure existed before our meeting.

These differences in perspective on a venue's role don't just vary from person to person; they also vary within a person — meaning that someone may gently scoff at the notion that there's any underlying social or political agenda in one breath, and then argue that the organization is a stand against commercialism, imperialism, and culturally oppressive social constructs in another.

Consistently, however, no one is dispassionate. A little burnt-out, maybe. Feigning ambivalence, even. But, when pressed, participants always identify something that inexorably secures their deep loyalty to the space. The connection is more intuitive than rational, it seems, and is born out of its participatory-ness — the potential for nonprofit concepts such as "youth leadership" or "civic engagement" to grow organically out of a community-run space where there is enormous potential for struggle. It's captured in the repetitive arc of the narratives in the Gilman book that go from distaste and resentment to appreciation and hope, sounding a little bit like recounts of relationships with a person put on a pedestal who turned out to be imperfect. I feel it myself, writing this.

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*Shannon Stewart cofounded the Vera Project in Seattle in 2001; she spent time with Gilman in between 2006 and 2008 when she was living in the San Francisco Bay Area, working for AMP, and compiling this book.*

# GILMAN'S PARTICIPATORY STRUCTURE *IN ONE PAGE*

**What's Worked:**

Members' meetings, shows, volunteer opportunities, and booking hours are always at the same time, so you know when and where to plug in even though there's no staff to help orient you or send out reminders.

Similarly, Gilman has created simple ways to make sure that the work gets done. Gilman's systems can be run by whoever shows up and is willing to do the work.

People involved at Gilman are committed — to the bands, to being youth-accessible, to the space, to each other. In the face of intense conflict, it's this commitment that gets them through the tough times.

Gilman is aware and involved in the neighborhood. Members meet with city council members, pick up trash, try to keep street disturbances to a minimum, and work with neighbors as much as possible.

Though there isn't anyone to hold your hand through the process, anyone who was involved with Gilman for a while could learn enough about building a participatory structure to do it themselves. This is how ABC No Rio's punk and hardcore matinees started.

**Issues That Come Up:**

It's safe to say that Gilman is committed to being a hate-free zone, that keeping out neo-Nazis and the worst of the bigots is core to the mission and was critical to the scene twenty years ago. Now that this seems to be less acute of an issue, it's unclear how Gilman pushes its anti-oppression agenda forward.

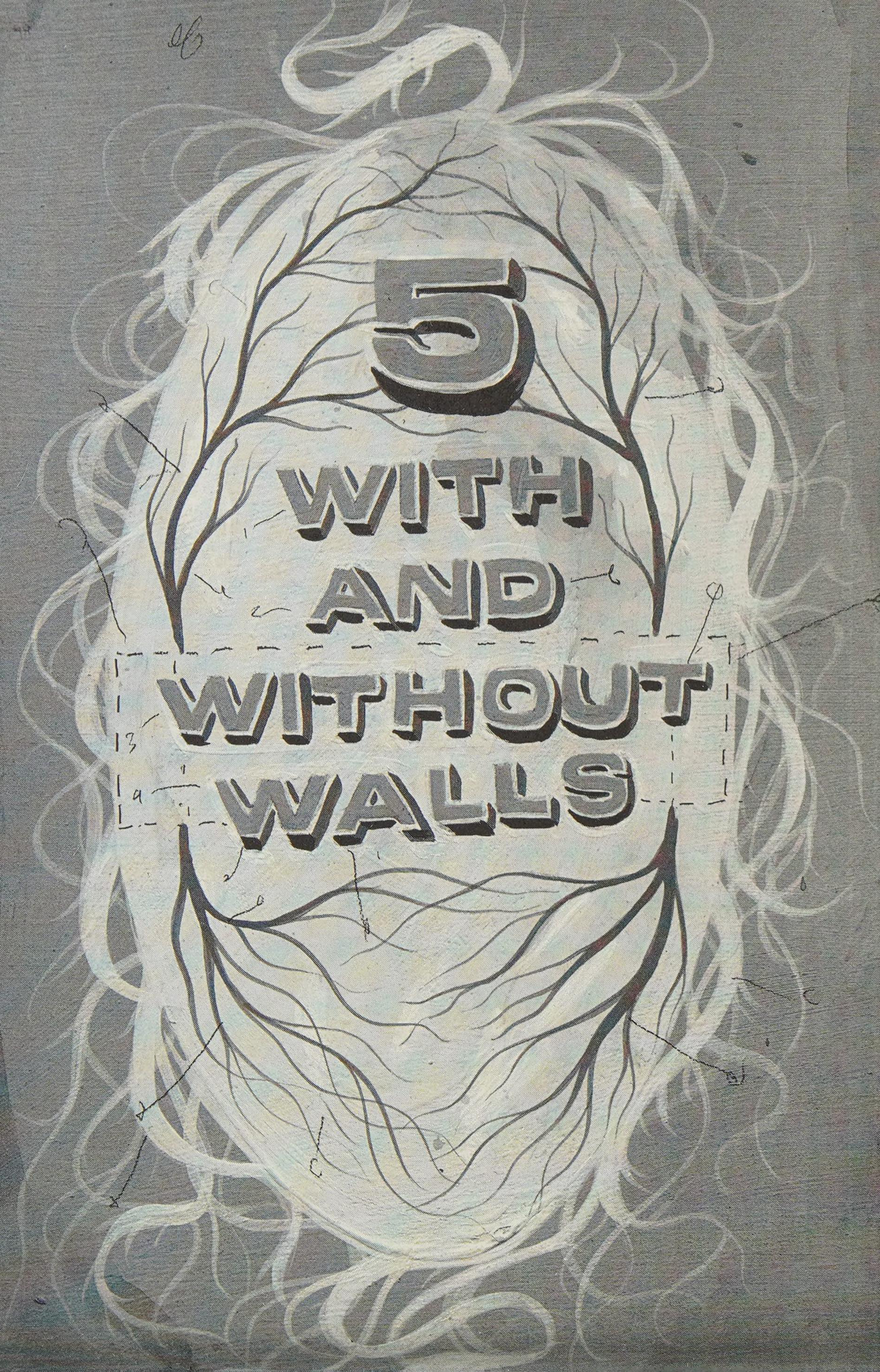
At Gilman, the participatory organizing skills (like agenda setting, facilitation, etc.) that their system relies on are sort of a given. These things seem to go hand-in-hand with grassroots punk and hip-hop, but I wonder how groups in other genres of music and art relate or feel comfortable with this style?

Without additional funding and/or staff, Gilman can only scrape by on the day-to-day activities without really being able to think about the long-term vision or health of the organization, or get feedback and respond to people who leave because of legitimate concerns.

**The Berkeley Factors:**

As Jesse Luscious put it in my interview with him, Berkeley is full of self-selecting, educated, privileged, and mobile residents. They also tend to be progressive and supportive of innovative ideas. Nationally, Berkeley is known for being a mecca for free speech, pirate radio, and the like. An unorthodox venue like Gilman is more likely to be supported here.

Berkeley is also known for its contribution to music in the realm of pop-punk, rock 'n' roll, and DIY music media, thanks to the likes of *Maximum Rocknroll,* Green Day, and Bad Religion. Support for this scene doesn't exist everywhere, so while parts of Gilman are replicable, Gilman itself is not.


5
WITH
AND
WITHOUT
WALLS

Artwork • Ryan Jaocb Smith

CHAPTER FIVE

# WITH AND WITHOUT WALLS

## Getting Space

*some people got together and they built a place they could call their own, and people came runnin from miles around sayin 'yer doin it all wrong,' making up the rules as they went along.*

This Bike Is a Pipe Bomb • "Debbie Dunlap"

**"All-ages."**

What do you think about when you hear this term? What do you see? Do you see a particular artist and an audience? Are you thinking of a specific venue? Is it a club? A basement? A warehouse? Maybe a place in another city that you've heard about?

Along with thinking about the musicians who have propelled the all-ages movement, the inclination to think about physical spaces in conjunction with the term "all-ages" makes sense. Walls are the things that do the work of age segregation in music. We don't have to show our IDs to anyone in order to listen to recorded music. The turntables, guitars, drum machines, and keyboards used to make music, and the notebooks where lyrics are written, aren't age restricted. There are no bouncers at the Myspace login page to keep teenagers (even determined 13-year-olds) from having a profile, or from uploading and streaming music.

When it comes to being able to perform and produce live music or even be an audience member, however, there are barely any consistent venues for people under 21 to participate in the very

industry they fuel. Lack of cultural space for youth — real bricks-and-mortar buildings — is a big issue; it is the physical manifestation of adultism, real estate disparity, and many other social issues that this book touches on.

I saved the chapter on space for later in the book on purpose, even though getting a space is easily the most effective and enticing thing you can do. Having something physical to attach your ideas to can bring them to life and can get people flocking to help out your project when you thought no one cared. But, because of the above issues and lack of information and skills, community spaces like ours are lost much more easily than they are found. It takes a strong foundation for them to survive.

When I talked with Omana Imani, the program director at Youth Uprising in Oakland, California, whose overview of her organization rolled off her lips like a script from a person who has responded to too many inquiries about how to start a program and facility like theirs, one of the most important things she said was, "I tell people not to get caught up in the walls." She must say this several times each Walk-Through Wednesday, the weekly event dedicated to touring people through YU's 26,000-square-foot facility and explaining their impressive array of programs and opportunities. Yes, Youth Uprising is amazingly resourced and was started and led by a group of teenagers, but it took eight years of planning before it opened in 2005.

If you are trying to create a space that will last, it is a long-term commitment. The bulk of this chapter most directly applies to smaller ventures than YU, and ones that will regularly be open to the public for events. Much of the content is based on interviews done with people running venues, and my experience as part of the team that started the Vera Project. Some of the things covered, like permits for assembly and maintenance of a heavily trafficked space, won't apply to programs more focused on drop-in music education programs or recording studios.

## THE EPIC JOURNEY INTO SPACE

Now we'll walk through the different stages of getting space, starting with the question of how aboveground you want this venture to be.

### The Legitimacy Question

As previously mentioned, 924 Gilman is an inspiration to a lot of communities across the country. The Gilman model seems

modest and accessible. Being volunteer-run and in a graffiti-covered, nondescript warehouse gives the impression that creating another Gilman is as easy as getting a space and starting to do shows. The backstory is that getting the paperwork and authorization to be legal was the first item of business in starting the space. In the end, it cost almost $40,000. That's $40,000 in the 1980s.

Of course, you don't *have* to do it this way. There are as many reasons not to worry about being all-the-way legal (like how nearly impossible it is) as there are reasons to operate on the up-and-up. DIY and underground music venues often straddle legality, with one foot firmly rooted on either side of the line.

Here are some of the questions to ask yourself in figuring out whether to be legit or not.

*Accessibility.* Will it make or break the turnout for events if you can't put your address on things, or if you can't advertise in the usual places that people look to see what shows are happening? Or is the scene small enough that word of mouth will suffice? Keep in mind that, for a lot of reasons, most teenagers aren't able to go to illegal shows.

*Risk.* How likely is it that you will be sued in the event of an accident? How easy would it be to help raise money to pay for someone's medical bills? Things can be especially risky if they involve people under 18. For tight-knit communities this might not be such a big deal, but it's something to consider.

*Alcohol.* What's your stance on whether or not it's okay for people of age to drink alcohol at your shows without your having an alcohol license? If you want this rule to be flexible, to allow people to brown bag or to sell alcohol by "donations," you will probably not be able to have a legal all-ages music space. Of course, you can be a legal alcohol vendor, and in some states, at some times, have all-ages shows. But if you take that route, you are now a bar, and you need another book.

*Local Scene.* What are the laws where you live, and what else is going on there? Is there a law that specifically restricts all-ages shows? Is it enforced? In some places, cops and officials just don't care about people putting on shows because they've got too many other things to worry about, but this mentality isn't something to count on. It seemed to all-ages show organizers in San Francisco that police didn't much care about under-the-radar shows, and then in one week, three were shut down and no places for all-ages shows were left.



The Ford Plant in Brantford, Ontario, sponsored this show in a river for the Murdered City Music Festival. Photo by Aviva Cohen

*Zoning and Permitting.* Will you be operating in a space that's zoned correctly for live music performance and that has the appropriate permits? If not, what would it take to bring it up to code? Sometimes people have access to a great space, but to bring it up to code would cost tens of thousands of dollars, and so they opt for doing things on the DL.

*Flexibility.* How flexible and responsive can you be? Is it easy to move things at the last minute? Are there places that can accommodate shows that might be canceled during sound check? Are the bands you work with aware of the chance that things could get canceled?

*Longevity.* Do you have a goal of having a lasting and consistent all-ages music space? Are there other underground organizations that have lasted a long time where you live that imply this is possible?

**What You are Looking for in a Space**

Whether you are looking for space to squat, lease, or buy, you can apply these criteria:

*Neutrality and Accessibility.* Think about the patrons, volunteers, and staff that it takes to put on the shows and how they will get to the space. Aim for finding a space that is easy to get to by public transportation, if possible — or at least easy to find. If you are serving a specific neighborhood, find space in neutral territory if there are gang rivalries, and if you want to be accessible to the whole city, aim for something centrally located.

*Smaller Is Better.* Not that you want to intentionally keep people out, but it's always better to have a smaller space than a big one. If you think about the best shows you've been to, you probably weren't leaning against a wall staring at empty square footage in front of a band. After a year of doing 50- to 100-person shows in a 500-person venue (a local union hall), the Vera Project finally understood this phenomenon and moved.

*Acoustics.* Sound engineers and designers often refer to how "bright" a room is, meaning how much the sound reverberates and reflects. You can test brightness by clapping your hands and listening to how much the sound bounces around. The longer the sound takes to decay, the harder you and your sound folks will have to work to make the room sound good for shows or recording.

*Aesthetics.* While you want parents to feel okay about dropping their kids off, you don't want to prioritize parental tastes over what appeals to young people. A space shouldn't feel childish or institutional, and it should not be that big a deal if things get tagged or stickers end up everywhere.

*Visit the Place at Night.* It's important to see what the neighborhood is like at night. What else is around there? Are there people around? How safe does it feel? If you see people around, do they seem like they would mix okay with the crowd your space will draw?

*Go for Consistency.* If you can swing it, try to do shows at the same time, place, and days of the week. When working with touring bands that need shows every day of the week, this can be very hard to do, but aim for as much consistency as possible and your young audience members will appreciate your efforts.

## NO SPACE

Teen Center Without Walls (TCW2) in Ypsilanti, Michigan, is literally a few miles from Ann Arbor, home of Neutral Zone, the nation's most well-known youth-run facility, which houses a youth-driven record label and concert-promotion group. In contrast, Ypsilanti has no gathering place for young people, and it barely even has a bus that can get people from one place to another. Without getting caught up in the walls, TCW2 is taking a stab at creating cultural gathering opportunities for the young people in their community — people that face enormous economic and educational disadvantages in comparison to young people in Ann Arbor.

TCW2 uses known public facilities rather than underground spaces to host its events, such as the state college campus, parks, and recreation facilities. They are able to do this through an affiliation with their county government, much like Youth Uprising in Oakland, which ultimately had their facility granted and subsidized by Alameda County.

Club Sandwich, a collective in San Francisco that also operates without its own space, puts on most of its shows in almost-legal spaces and does some shows in houses and warehouses. Because they mostly just want to help out bands, see good music, and keep their day jobs, doing this kind of low-key show promotion without a permanent space works well.

# CRITERIA FOR USING SOMEONE ELSE'S SPACE

**Know the reputation:** It's always good to get a feel for what a space is like to work with in advance and also to know how it is perceived by your potential audience members, parents, the police, etc.

**Contracts:** Though many community spaces might be cool with a conversation or handshake, make sure there is some written evidence of what you have agreed to. You can just write up an email with the date, times, prices, lineup info, publicity, and fee agreements.

**Liability Insurance:** is a good thing. Technically, you are supposed to have liability insurance to be promoting events at all, or else be added to someone's policy as "an additional insured." If you are working with a small business or community venue, it might not even come up. There is more information later in the chapter.

**Publicity:** Find out how the venue publicizes and if that is included in your agreement. Make sure you know how they want to be listed and vice versa. Also, determine whether the space is accessible to people with disabilities so you can include it in your advertising.

**Clean Up:** It is hugely important to maintain the space like it's your own when you are renting and leave it cleaner than you found it. This will help ensure your ability to be able to do shows there in the future.

**Supplies, Equipment, and Electricity:** Do they have a PA or lighting that is adequate? How likely is it that they will be out of water or toilet paper? Do you need to bring your own?

You may find public gathering spaces that you can use, rent, or borrow at:

*Public Libraries.* These days, libraries are really picking up the slack of cultural programming in communities.

*Community Centers.* Most every city has community centers for public use, and many suburban towns actually have teen centers. Finding out if there are youth drop-in spaces with no music programming could be a good place to start, although those kinds of spaces are often aesthetically challenging.

*Union Halls.* These are in every town, most of them have big meeting rooms with PAs, and they are already permitted for assembly.

*Churches.* All-ages shows have historically had a special relationship with the basements of churches because the spaces tend to be free or cheap, and at the right ones, the leaders are open-minded. They are also permitted for assembly and usually have sound systems.

*Nonprofit Facilities* (such as galleries, theaters, etc.). Sometimes you can take advantage of the space that other nonprofits have secured. However, many depend on rental income to support their own work and keep their space. You might expect that they are the ones most likely to let you use their space for free (and sometimes they are!), but they rarely can afford to. It's best to develop some sort of ongoing relationship, trade situation, or partnership with one.

*High School or College Auditoriums.* I put on a Mount Eerie show in a high school auditorium in San Francisco, and not only was it pretty affordable, but the acoustics were great.

*Wherever You Want.* If you decide to exist off the grid, warehouses, basements, kitchens, backyards, and bus and train stations are great places to put on shows, and the more creative you get, the more fun it can be.

When you are renting a space event by event, you should expect to pay either a flat fee or a percentage of door receipts. When the Vera Project rented, we had to pay $200 a night for places that held 125 to 500 people; sometimes we also had to pay for the venue's staff. In San Francisco and most other big cities, it's not uncommon to give the venue 50 percent or 60 percent of the door receipts from a show.

Generally, the more public and official the space is, the higher the costs are, unless you've worked out some sort of deal.

## YOUR FIRST SPACE

If you've been doing shows in temporary spaces and are gaining momentum, it might be time to look around for your own space to use. The first time you approach getting a space, it's best to get a short-term lease with an option to renew, rather than looking for a long-term lease or to buy a building — unless you have a lot of dough and experience leasing and operating a venue.

### The Search

In urban areas, trying to find a space that is affordable and appropriate for all-ages shows in urban areas is the biggest challenge of this process. In Seattle, there were a few ways that new arts organizations acquired space to get going that are replicable in any area:

*Empty Theaters and Clubs.* Look for arts-related nonprofits or clubs that are moving because of development. Sometimes people move out early in the development process and a beautiful theater or gallery space sits empty for months or years before the condos come (this happened with Vera Project's first real space in downtown Seattle). In New York City, they actually have a program that links artists up with spaces that are unoccupied. Though there is no formal program in Chicago, the mission of the South Union Arts collective is to use about-to-be-razed spaces for shows and art.

*Empty Neighborhoods.* Along similar lines of following commercial development, there could be an entire section of a neighborhood that has been vacated for development, leaving tons of possible spaces. In the center of Seattle, there is a light-industrial area where Microsoft mogul Paul Allen is working in partnership with the city to transform the area and double the density in the downtown core. He started buying buildings years ago and has sat on some of them for over a decade. In the meantime, a few scrappy and visionary arts organizers came into the area and made stuff happen. The rent: DIRT CHEAP. The terms:

CRAPPY. Vera considered moving to this neighborhood in our fourth move but realized that we were ready to do something more permanent. In the interim, the organization rented a three-story house in that empty neighborhood for $750 a month (it was the only house in a sea of empty warehouses and commercial spaces) and had a year of being a punk house.

*Houses.* Speaking of houses, some are actually zoned for commercial use, are awesome spaces for running programs and shows, and have more affordable rental prices. Of course, residential neighborhoods are not the best places for putting on loud shows, but you might find a house that is a little set off from the rest of the neighborhood. Also, you are often allowed to make noise up until nine, ten or eleven o'clock at night.

These types of places are going to be the places where you can negotiate the cheapest leases. Even if it seems like you'll be doing a lot of work to get a space up to speed only to be kicked out a year later, it will give you a chance to experiment, see what the demand for your organization really is, and let you establish a track record.

If you're living outside of cities where affordable real estate is scarce, the possibilities expand immensely. Simply think about spaces made for gathering; there are probably a lot of viable buildings in your midst. For example, almost as prominent as churches in every U.S. town are Elks Lodges, Odd Fellows Halls, Masonic Temples, and Eagles Clubs. I'm not sure what all has gone on inside these mystical buildings, but they house some of the most beautiful gathering spaces in the United States. In bigger cities, developers are snatching them up, but in smaller towns, these remnants of a passing culture offer possibilities for something else to be born. Union buildings and old public-works buildings are other options worth checking into.

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## ENTERING THE ZONE OF GENTRIFICATION

In order to talk about opening an art and music space, we also have to talk about gentrification. Gentrification is a slow and complicated process in which land use and demographics of residents and businesses change in a neighborhood in a way that pushes real estate prices up and displaces people. This is happening in at least some part of every major metropolitan

# THE LIVE / WORK MODEL

One way that artists and arts-based organizations have addressed the issue of space is by finding a big enough space for both programs and residents. The Department of Safety (DoS) in the small town of Anacortes, Washington, was one such organization. The DoS was located in the town's old police and fire station, which is zoned for people to live upstairs (where the firefighters slept). The first level was a legal public gathering space. The DoS depended on the four to six rent-paying residents who would commit to a year tenancy and some basic volunteer responsibilities to keep the space up and running. By having rent-paying residents, the DoS outlasted many other DIY spaces and provided a venue for all-ages shows, film screenings, and festivals, as well as an art gallery, recording studio, zine library, and an ongoing artist-in-residence program.

Beyond the DoS, almost every warehouse arts space is sustained by having people live there (not always legally) and supplementing rent by producing events. In this way, grassroots live/work situations, as opposed to commercial developer-driven live/work situations, provide one of the best models for being able to afford an arts space.

Live/work models also present some unique challenges: it becomes important to define what is public space and what is private space. And the relational challenges of volunteer-based work can be heightened when you're collaborating with your housemates; issues like "whose dirty dishes are these?" may interact with issues like "who's putting up posters for the show?" Clear written statements defining individual responsibilities and commitments can be helpful in providing a system of accountability.

area in the U.S., and artists and cultural organizations play an interesting role in it.

The trajectory goes like this: artists (mostly white ones), many of whom have had a middle- or upper-class upbringing, choose to dive into the arts scene to find that, at the community and emerging level, there is no money for artists or art spaces. Feeling this economic crunch, they go to where they can find space that will fit their budgets: usually neighborhoods where low-income communities and communities of color have been living for decades. Then a few friends come along, and this makes it more comfortable for other white, upper-class people to live and hang out there. Then a few boutique businesses that want to cater to them come. Then landlords jack up rent in entire buildings (if there is not rent control), Whole Foods replaces corner stores, placards announcing a "new resident community" with made-up neighborhood-sounding names like "Stone Gardens" or "Tribeca 2" are hung outside of construction sites. One immigrant community is replaced by another — the white urban dwellers with disposable incomes.

Because most artists don't make any money, they too get priced out of the neighborhood and have to move on to start this process over. Sometimes they blame yuppies and trust fund kids for pushing them out of a neighborhood as if the displacement trend started when they had to leave, rather than when they decided to come to the neighborhood in the first place, not to mention all the years of racist, classist development that have created this cycle.

The arts and culture piece is one of a multitude of factors in developers' use in land-speculation processes. As an artist working in a certain place, you are a signifier to someone with an interest in knowing what the next "upcoming" neighborhood is. Developers want art in "their" neighborhoods in order to attract the condo buyers, the same way they want the new park that the local community organization fought tooth and nail to build so they can turn it into a dog park. But they don't want artists or other locals who can't afford their economic scale of living.

Because developers have this unique relationship to artists (i.e., wanting them around to make the neighborhood more attractive to new residents), arts organizations might get the impression that they are somehow safe from the efforts to "clean up" a neighborhood. But, unless you are a big old-school arts institution, this is just not true. After twelve years of housing artists, nonprofit arts groups, and social justice organizations, the

Odd Fellows hall in Seattle changed ownership in 2007 and residents found themselves facing a 300 percent hike in their monthly rental rates. I stood dumbstruck outside the building a few months later staring at the banner that hung irreverently from the corner. "History For Lease: Office, Retail and Creative Spaces" it read. My stomach turned. Could you really kick out all the artists and arts organizations that made the spaces creative in the first place and then advertise "creative spaces"? In a later discussion with friends, someone said ominously, "It's the last stage of gentrification—when they kick out the queers and the creative class," reminding us of all the people that had been pushed out before this stage.

So, even as artists play a role in helping gentrification along, they are obviously not winning either. No one wins in gentrification, except for developers and the upscale chain stores that sell expensive organic coffee, cheese, and olives. That does not involve a lot of us.

Conversations about space and displacement among artists and organizations that aren't explicitly serving a community of color can be kind of clumsy if not met with resistance, but that shouldn't stop us from having them. Having space to live, work, get food, go to school in a healthy and vibrant environment is everyone's right. Instead of being paralyzed by the inevitability of gentrification or boiling it down to blaming one new business or individual that moved into a neighborhood, we can find many places to intervene and step up.

Rock Paper Scissors is a collective, primarily made up of women, that opened a DIY space for locally made goods, art exhibitions, and classes in what used to be a rather empty part of downtown Oakland. As other gallery spaces popped up and started working together, a little art scene emerged, bringing people into the area who had not historically been there. RPS has been trying to understand how to be accountable to the community that they inserted themselves into. They get a lot of props, they get some criticism, and from time to time their window gets broken. They try to take some of the heat and come up with solutions. Some things they have done in response are adding youth programs that are run in partnership with other organizations in the area, selling the goods of artists from their neighborhood, changing how they curate the space, and holding openings that are inclusive and more integrated with their surroundings. They worked with the city to make the Oakland Art Murmur, an art walk on the first Friday of each month, into a mini street fair for the neighborhood that is alcohol-free. They

help organize it and are in charge of cleaning up afterwards, as well as patrolling the streets for illegal drinking and thus putting an end to the art kids getting drunk and rowdy outside of galleries. This hasn't been a popular move among some of their peers, but it has demonstrated respect to the families in the neighborhood around them.

Some humble suggestions (geared toward white, middle-class artists and organizers):

- If gentrification is a new term for you, do some research on how it functions in cities.
- Research the history of neighborhoods where you work and live to get a sense of how things have evolved over time.
- Look for spaces in light-industrial areas instead of in struggling neighborhoods with a lot of residents.
- See what kind of anti-displacement work is being done by activists and community organizations in the area where you want to work — volunteer for them and advocate alongside them for better rent control and planning policies that can benefit everyone.
- Use your access or position to voice support for sustainable development.
- Support and build alliances or partnerships with organizations other than white arts organizations and businesses.
- Understand that critique of your space in a gentrifying neighborhood is warranted on some level. Don't take it personally or get tricked into an us-vs.-them mind-set, especially under pressure from other white-owned businesses and organizations.
- Find ways to get support from other folks dealing with these same problems so you don't get burnt out and cynical.

## PROSPECTING MORE PERMANENT SPACES

When looking for a more permanent space, you should consider all of the same criteria you would in renting space on a per-event basis. You should also consider:

- Whether the space allows your organization some room to grow — an extra room that could be converted into a recording studio or darkroom, for example
- Amenability of the landlord or property manager

- The state of the zoning, permits, and fire inspection.
- Basic functionality of electricity and plumbing.
- How much work you will have to put into sound design and treatments.
- Neighbors, neighbors, neighbors! The most common reason nightclubs and music venues get shut down is because their neighbors complain about them.

**Before the Doors Open**

Throughout this whole process, you'll want to be in touch with the local agency that deals with buildings and land use. Eventually, this agency is the one that will issue your permits, and they can be helpful from the very start. They might be able to give you information about where you can look for vacant or soon-to-be-vacant space, and their archives have maps and information about every building in their jurisdiction. Histories of buildings are cool.

When you are looking at different spaces, the landlord or real estate agent should know what the current state of permitting and capacity is. If not, you'll have to piece together some information from the fire department and the department of planning and land use. You may also need to check in with the local music and nightclub regulation agency.

Here's a quick overview of some of the permit and licensing issues:

*Zones and Permits.* To be legit, you must be zoned for commercial use and permitted for assembly (meaning that people can gather in your space). If you're planning on moving into a space that lacks the proper zoning and permits, you could be starting a long and frustrating process. The two things that spaces usually lack that cost tens if not hundreds of thousands of dollars are emergency sprinkler systems and adequate access for people with disabilities. It would be nice if the government would pay for these mandatory improvements, but it won't. In some areas, things like earthquake retrofitting and flood protection are required. Oftentimes, as the new lessee, you will still be responsible for installing or updating these things in the process of renewing your permit.

*Capacity.* You cannot legally open before the fire department determines how many people can gather safely in your building (and a word to the wise: they don't really operate on your schedule). They'll come in and inspect your space, counting exits, stairways, and bathrooms,

and making sure the sprinklers function and that the exits and pathways are illuminated. Then you'll have to post legal occupancy signs and figure out a way to keep track of attendance at events — using a clicker, paper tally, or some other numbering system.

*Liability Insurance.* At some point in the process you'll have to get liability insurance, and all the agencies you deal with will want to see proof that you have it. In Seattle, given the historically restrictive climate for all-ages shows, it was incredibly hard for the Vera Project to find an insurance company or agent who would insure an organization that wanted to mix live music and minors. I got a lot smarter about saying the word "performance" instead of "show" or "concert." I emphasized the other arts that we presented and described ourselves as a youth service nonprofit rather than being mostly young kids doing punk, indie, and hip-hop shows. You can ask other performance nonprofits or clubs for the name of their insurance broker. If you're having no luck, you could approach another organization to sponsor your events for a while and add you to their insurance plan. Some resources for insurance are listed in our online resources at resources.allages.net.

*Music/Entertainment Permit.* In some cities you have to have a permit to provide entertainment, especially for all-ages shows. Oftentimes, however, these regulations don't apply to small operations, nonprofits, and spaces that aren't serving alcohol.

### Opening Your Doors

It's always a good idea to have a dress rehearsal for your opening event in advance, to test the sound system and make sure you have everything you need to make the event go smoothly. Tell your neighbors about the grand opening and invite the nice ones. Then take some deep breaths and know that some things will go wrong — and that's okay.

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## THE TIDAL WAVE OF NEW ISSUES YOU NEVER THOUGHT ABOUT

Having your own venue or space will open up a whole new world of opportunities that you would have never imagined. You can stand back and literally watch people flock to it. Of course, they won't necessarily be paying audience members (you'll have

to work to get those), but people that want to use the space, partner with you, develop new programs, and so on.

The nutshell version of Vera's first year of having its own building read like this: We hosted three times as many events as we ever had and started tons of programs. Then we almost quit at the end of that year from being so worn out. At that point, we stepped back to reflect on what we could and couldn't do, clarified staff roles, and started fundraising like mad.

Vera also had a problem with theft — laptops, bikes, mics, you name it. We didn't really think about having locked storage closets or locking our front door all the time. As if to make up for our losses, we also acquired a bunch of random in-kind donations, including several half-functional fax machines, broken furniture, and abandoned art pieces. At one point, a 14-year-old volunteer almost fell through the ceiling when she was helping with electrical wiring. Another volunteer hand-painted all our furniture. People moved out the moldy mattresses and dead rats from our attic. Others built custom vacuum tables for screen-printing and converted an abandoned woodshop into a community silk-screen shop. It was one unbelievable thing after another.

**Super-Awesome Venue in Need of Janitors**

A huge contributing factor to the burnout of the first year was having 6,800 square feet of property to maintain and clean — and hundreds of people coming through making a mess of it.

A few things that will make maintaining your venue easier:

- Appoint someone to oversee the facility and equipment maintenance. Have the position rotate if no one person is psyched about doing it.
- Fine-tune a volunteer cleaning system for after every class, show, and event. If you are shorthanded, let a couple of people in for free to get some help with cleanup.
- Use a little bit of your income from door receipts to have someone clean weekly or monthly.
- Have a cleaning/renovation party once or twice a year to get a bunch of help doing a deep clean and making all the little repairs that will pop up.

**Coming Under Fire**

Inevitably, you will have to deal with the possibility of losing your space. Sometimes it's just when the momentum is starting to build, and in other cases you may know it's coming years in advance but still find yourself not knowing the next move

to make.

Two months after the Holland Project opened up in Reno, Nevada, in a city-owned building with the blessings of the mayor and the surrounding community, a neighbor filed a noise complaint and all programs came screeching to a halt. There wasn't any point in taking sides. Technically, Holland was there first and was serving hundreds of kids a week. On the other hand, the neighbor's house was one of the few that were subsidized and, for many reasons — including being a war veteran — having peace and quiet was his right. What could you do?

The complaint resulted in a community forum, dozens of meetings, and inspections of the building that suddenly found it unfit for assembly. The leadership of the Holland Project scrambled to move shows and programs into basements and random places around town, but ultimately the organization had to leave the venue that volunteers had sunk months of work and thousands of dollars into.

A few other things that threaten the existence of your space:

- People drinking, doing drugs, or tagging in front of your venue while an event is going on.
- Going over capacity at a show and getting caught by the fire marshal.
- Not being up to code or current with your fire inspection.
- Not paying admissions taxes on ticket sales or other business and venue taxes. You can usually file for exemption, but if you don't initially, the local authorities can come after you for back taxes.
- An injury in your space without liability insurance.
- Changes in local restrictions on nightclubs, which tend to happen often.
- Police harassment.
- Rent going up.

Clearly, there are a lot of things you need to stay on top of to keep your doors open. Monitoring the outside; double-checking your emergency lighting; and making friends with your neighbors, the fire department, and anyone who might know a thing or two about nightclub legislation (another club that has been around a long time, a local music activist, the city's music office, the local nighttime entertainment coalition, etc.) will all help tremendously. More on this in Chapter 8.

There are lots of other less dramatic but equally important reasons why you might have to move, like if you decide you need

more room for programming, something too good to turn down opens up somewhere else, you're ready to have a better landlord, and/or to find a space with fewer maintenance issues.

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## THE LONG HAUL

When you realize your organization has to move out of its home, there probably will and should be a moment of taking stock and asking: Is there still a need for the organization? Are the people involved still motivated? Do you need to reorganize or possibly even dissolve?

But because this is about building sustained independent cultural infrastructure, I'll assume that the people involved in your organization shift a little, new plans are written, and that you are going to look for a new long-term lease or try to buy your own space.

### The Capital Campaign

A capital campaign is exactly that: a campaign run for a certain amount of time with the express purpose of getting capital (money) to purchase capital (property). This differs from the fundraising done to support programs, services, or general operating costs talked about in the next chapter.

Capital campaigns are well-known in the nonprofit world. Known to be an exciting and invigorating time for an organization. Known to be the hardest thing an organization may ever go through. Known to tap every resource in the community. And known to take the organization to a whole different level.

Capital campaigns may vary in size and duration. You probably have to do a mini capital campaign just to get going in the first place. At Vera, our first semipermanent home was a theater that took about $70,000 in cash and in-kind donations to get going. It took about six months. The Vera Project's second capital campaign raised about $2 million; it took two years to renovate a building with a long-term lease. The Neutral Zone's campaign in Ann Arbor raised $4.2 million; it took a year and a half to find a space they will own within five years.

Some things to note about capital campaigns:

- There is way more than fundraising to manage. You also will have to oversee the design and construction of the new space and your interim space(s) and program(s).
- Given that there is all this to do, plus everything else you

were already doing, you should hire someone to head up the campaign, if you can. If you are an all-volunteer organization, this means trying to hire a staff person to oversee the amount of paperwork, meetings, and fundraising that has to happen. That person should get support from everyone.

- Double every estimate of time and money you make. That means twice as long for the time it will take to raise the money, twice as long for the time it will take to build the thing, and twice the amount of money it will take to build it.
- And then prepare for some fallout. After such a big fundraising push, it's normal for people to need to leave the organization and for some people to start to resent how much you have asked for money. In the aftermath of a capital campaign, you will want to try to have a period where you are not asking for anything, only thanking people profusely.

This level of fundraising cannot be done without rigorous financial management and a proven track record — meaning qualitative and quantitative data and materials that emphasize the effect your organization has had on community development, youth development, and arts education and presentation.

In the process of getting money from bigger companies and donors, your organization will become more and more professionalized. The culture and aesthetics will probably shift, and the new venue you'll have at the end might not resemble your punk, DIY, or street roots. On the other hand, you will serve way more people, provide a higher-quality arts space, and have gained invaluable skills from the process.

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## SECURITY IN A SECURITY CULTURE

One of the biggest and most pressing issues in having a space is how to deal with security. The security of stuff is pretty straightforward. Make sure you have a locked place to keep cash. When you have big shows, don't leave volunteers at the door with stacks of twenty-dollar bills (not because they might take it, but because somebody else might). Try to provide a safe place for bands to store their stuff. Store microphones, laptops, and things that are easy to nab someplace special. Get an alarm system if necessary.

How to try to provide security for people is another story. Different things make different people feel safe for different reasons. It depends on where you grew up, how much chaos or violence you've had to endure, and whether you are part of a community that feels protected or policed by people in uniforms. And, finally, there are a lot of things that can create a feeling of safety in a space that have nothing to do with what we know to be "security."

Young people, by and large, don't get treated well by local authority figures and have to deal with them so much that having cops or licensed and bonded security folks at the door tends to encourage rebellion instead of instilling a sense of safety. Most spaces instead rely heavily on peer security, vibe setting (creating an atmosphere of chillness), signage, and crafty de-escalation.

I sat in on an organization meeting after there had been a scuffle at a Youth Movement Records event in downtown Oakland, and the venue's security handled the situation poorly. During a spontaneous dance battle in the middle of an emcee's set, things got kind of ugly, and kids started getting in one another's faces. Someone got pushed, the lights came on, the music got turned off, and the front doors to the venue got locked. A mild melee ensued and the event was over. No one was hurt, but the event was unnecessarily cut short, meaning hundreds of young people were unfairly paying the price for the bad behavior of a few folks. The way the venue's security dealt with the situation provided textbook examples of what not to do in the event of an incident.

Brother Los, YMR's program director at the time, facilitated a debriefing conversation in which he and YMR artists strategized about how to better deal with situations like this in the future. Here are a few key pointers that came out of this conversation and my own experience:

- If YMR is not doing security themselves, they need to meet ahead of time with the venue security staff and come to an agreement about how the crowd should be managed.
- A YMR artist, staff member, or volunteer should be the one greeting people at the door. If pat-downs are necessary, the YMR rep will do it in the most respectful, nonintrusive way possible and explain to patrons why it's necessary. This person needs to be from the same community as audience members coming to the show.
- Everyone working the event should understand some basic things about de-escalation at music events. It is *not* a good

idea to shut off the music, turn on the lights, and lock the doors. This is a great way to create panic. Rather, notify the artist immediately; get the DJ to turn the music down a little and/or put on something mellow. Have the artists do the de-escalation talk from the stage, reminding the crowd that everyone is there to have fun and treat each other respectfully. The artists have a mic; they have most people's attention. No one can understand a person yelling in a crowd.

- If the situation persists, separate the problem person without being confrontational; for example, by having a staff member or volunteer walk up to a person and say, "Hey, can I talk to you over here for a second?" Don't touch them or try to yank them out of the audience. If you get them outside the crowd, go to a well-lit place and make sure you have peers nearby that can see you. They don't need to surround the person, but just make sure that you are safe and that they can back you up if necessary. On a couple of occasions at Vera we had to make human blockades to push people out of the venue without touching them; we did this by forming a line and inching up on them until they were out the door.
- Unfortunately, situations don't usually end at the door. A lot of scuffles break out as soon as people are outside the venue. You'll need to hang around and make sure the problem people leave. If violence seems probable, and it is beyond your control, you might need to call the police. Some organizations avoid the cops because of aforementioned reasons and because it could provide support for any potential attempt to shut a place down. Your responsibility first and foremost is to try to keep people in your space safe, in whatever way makes the most sense for your organization.

Building off of this list, below is more information on dealing with security in your space.

**Peer Security & Vibe Control**

Peer security is where there is no difference between the people frequenting the space and the people trying to keep things running smoothly and safely. Peer security can be volunteers that you pull out of the ticket line to help keep an eye on things, or a person in the community you pay $50 to help out at the door who understands the vibes that need to be set upon

entrance. At Department of Safety, they called this vibe control, as in, "Andrew, will you go over to those kids who are slam-dancing and exercise some vibe control?"

And yes, young people and teens are the right population to practice peer security; they actually do a much better job than adults. In *The Case Against Adolescence,* for example, Robert Epstein talks about the effectiveness of teen courts, an emerging justice system where teens caught for minor juvenile defenses get tried by their peers. The rate at which young people end up back in trouble after teen court is under 15 percent; compare this to the adult-run juvenile justice system, where recidivism rates are about 60 percent. Teens have more respect for peers than authority figures, but beyond that, the studies on teen courts have talked about how collaborative communication and problem solving make peer enforcement work.

Being held accountable by someone who sees that they have as much to lose as you do by unfair treatment is key.

**Rule Setting and Enforcement**

Simply having rules for the sake of having rules (to follow, break, or enforce) is not helpful. This is why, for many spaces, the only "rule" is respect.

Rules or codes of conduct are supposed to be like agreements we make with one another about how people will share space. Breaking a rule isn't always about violation as much as it is a disagreement. Having to figure out what shared values are around a space and how to set the tone for them is a better way to approach rule setting than making a laundry list of things that you then have to bust people for.

If a patron or community member breaks an agreement, think about how best to hold that person accountable. Maybe it's as simple as warning them. Maybe they need to be asked to leave, but are told they can come back another time. When people came to Vera shows wasted and were making a scene, we simply said, "Hey, looks like you've had a little too much to drink. You're welcome to come back to Vera another time when you aren't drunk, but tonight I'm going to have to ask you to leave." The idea is not to eighty-six people for good unless you have to. Everyone makes mistakes and you don't want to create bad blood with people.

**Bag Searches**

Looking in people's bags at the door may or may not be necessary. It's not something that's easy to talk about frankly, but having audience members bring guns and other weapons is

not only a possibility, it's a reality in many venues. You probably know your community best and can decide if it seems necessary to add this extra layer of security to your space or not.

At Vera, we would do this for all our nighttime concerts, but not for events in the gallery space or for people dropping in. It usually entailed a 15-year-old volunteer peeking into people's bags, halfway-interestedly looking for weapons or alcohol. Since this policy has been instituted, the worst offenses involve an occasional pocketknife or bottle of booze.

**Signage**

To give people a heads-up that we would search their bags, we actually put signs on the door at events. That way, people have the chance to avoid a tense or embarrassing situation. It's easy to go overboard with signs, especially in nonprofit and collective spaces, but a few clear, concise notifications can go a long way. Some venues prefer to go the very straight-up route with signs that say, "No racism, sexism, homophobia, alcohol, drugs, weapons, or assholes." Others may go a subtler route or use humor to communicate the humdrum details of building management.

Other ways that signs can help with safety is by having gender-neutral signage on at least one bathroom and proper signage for people needing to use the elevator.

**Outfits**

Though coordinated outfits may be way too formal for some venues, it's helpful to have some sort of of letting that people can know who is on staff: stickers, badges, armbands, or handcrafted or airbrushed T-shirts. Get crafty.

**Trainings**

When Vera was getting off the ground in Seattle, we reached out to other promoters and security people at clubs to do a security training for us, and it was incredibly helpful. After they left, we talked about what parts of their advice made sense for us and what didn't. Then we adjusted our methods accordingly.

Understanding the basics of how situations escalate or de-escalate is really useful. Reach out to people in your community, or to public and community agencies that deal with these issues, to help develop security training. Even if your training is a five-minute meeting before a show, making sure your security volunteers know what's up is critical.

# PLEASE OBSERVE THE
# TEN COMMANDMENTS
# OF THE DEPT. OF SAFETY

## (METAPHYSICAL MORAL ABCs)

1. NO DRUGS

2. NO ALCOHOL

2a. If you are intoxicated or high at a DOS event, you will be banned like a butcher at a vegan banquet.

3. NO SMOKING INSIDE THE DOS

3a. No underage smoking will be tolerated; and if you are of age, please don't throw your stinky butts on our or our neighbor's property. THANKS.

4. NO LITTERING

5. GOSH!

6. NO PARKING AT THE CHURCH

7. NO GOING NEAR THE CHURCH

8. DON'T BE NOSY, PINOCCHIO!

9. DON'T BE LOUD OUTSIDE: OUR FRIENDLY AND HARD-WORKING FIREFIGHTER NEIGHBORS NEED SLEEP!

10. LET'S HAVE FUN!

### Ins and Outs

Whether people can leave and come back into the same event is a big deal in the business of running venues. General consensus among adults is that if young people leave, they will get alcohol, weapons, or something else and bring it back into the venue, or that they will sneak out to an alley somewhere to get drunk or high and come back. I personally prefer to give people the benefit of the doubt and rely on bag searches and signage rather than restricting their physical movement — something that crosses too far into policing.

However, if there is reason to believe it's not safe to hang around outside, or if you have sensitive neighbors, it may make sense to institute a no-reentry policy.

## PHYSICAL MANIFESTATIONS

As you read through the stories of the organizations spotlighted in this book, you will get images and feelings of the different spaces and how they vary. You might know how you would feel when you walk into Cave 9 compared to the Neutral Zone or Youth Movement Records, and get a sense of whether you would fit in or be comfortable there. Would you walk in and plop yourself on the couch, start chatting with the person behind the sign-in desk, or find yourself put off by the dinginess of the couch or that someone would need an ID to come into what is supposed to be an "open space"?

Physical space holds a culture that creates access and boundaries beyond the ones organizations imagine having. If you live in a neighborhood with high rates of gun violence and you regularly lose friends and family members long before it's their time to go, you might appreciate the element of security a sign-in desk provides, allowing you to relax in a space. If you're in an area that is being taken over by department stores, chain restaurants, and a high-priced music and arts scene with security guards at every entrance, you probably appreciate the hole-in-the-wall venue with an unlocked door, no staff, and a kitchen that is nowhere near up to code for serving dinners, but has weekly Food Not Bombs buffets.

Something we didn't do as well as we could have when I was at the Vera Project was taking stock of how the space was serving our mission and whether the mission was reflected in who was and wasn't there. Just dealing with the space itself and the people that *were* there was overwhelming. But after

spending time traveling to different spots, I understand how important the culture of a space is and how little gestures can make all the difference.

This book is littered with tips and tricks for the layout of your space, but a few stand out in my mind:

- At the Neutral Zone's first space, the staff's offices were spread out all over the space instead of clumped together — this made the offices accessible, and it didn't seem as if there was an off-limits adults-only area.
- Batey Urbano has two computers sitting in their storefront in an economically depressed neighborhood, communicating their trust and confidence in the relationships they have built with the community.
- Justice by Uniting Creativity and Equality in Los Angeles has a sign-in desk at the entrance, and a graffiti sign that reads, "JUICE. Respect our authorities. Respect. No violence or weapons. No drugs or alcohol," and was painted by a participant.
- The Department of Safety in Anacortes had a sign posted in the window by the unlocked front door with the password to their wireless network and the message, "Free internet if you sit on the bench," indicating that you have arrived at a space where people will openly share their resources.
- The Point in the South Bronx looks a little bit like a graffiti-covered fortress on the outside, but once you walk in, the courtyard, the open garage doors, and big windows immediately let you see all the things going on.
- Youth Uprising has an ID system that scans members in (and once inside they get access to *everything for free),* but before you hit the sign-in desk there is a common area with couches and a grand piano that's called the community living room, and it's open to anyone, member or not.
- Lemp Art Space in St. Louis, Missouri, hangs a St. Louis city flag behind the stage area — their version of an advertisement for a place that's often overlooked on tour stops.

Beyond the layout and signage, the culture of a space relies on the people creating and managing it. This is what meeting facilitators might refer to as "holding space." When you host a party or an event, or are in charge of running a meeting, you are responsible for the climate of the space. It is up to you to pay attention to what seems to make people happy, who looks like they are about to bolt and what it is that might be making

them uncomfortable, what gets people in the door, what their experience is once they arrive, and a host of other things. It's your responsibility to try to keep the space safe, fun, and interesting, as well as creative, challenging, and thought-provoking.

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### GETTING SPACE SPOTLIGHT

In the next section, we'll look more at the journey of getting a building for the legendary Manhattan venue ABC No Rio, a space whose entrance is marked by a small yellow sign that reads, "Culture of Opposition Since 1980," with the organization's abbreviated history printed in both English and Spanish.

# CULTURE OF OPPOSITION SINCE 1980

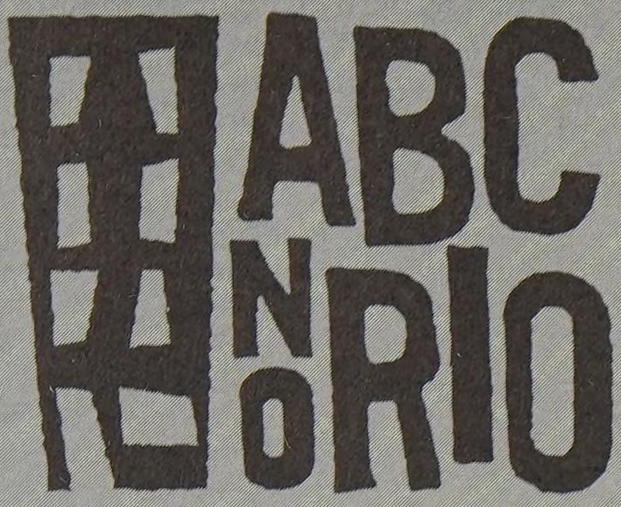
ABC NO RIO es un centro comunitario dedicado al arte y al activismo. Fue fundado en 1980 por un grupo de artistas comprometidos con causas políticas y sociales. Para obtener mayor información, por favor entre y hable con uno de nuestros voluntarios o visite nuestra pagina de internet.




ABC NO RIO is a collectively-run community center for art and activism. It was founded in 1980 by artists committed to political and social engagement. For more information, please visit our website or come inside and talk to a volunteer.

**156 RIVINGTON STREET NYC 10002**

**WWW.ABCNORIO.ORG 212.254.3697**




## VITALS

**Located:** Lower East Side of Manhattan • **Founded:** 1980 • **Org Type:** 501(c)(3) nonprofit, collective of collectives • **Music Genre of Focus:** Punk and hardcore, folk-punk, experimental/improvisatory • **Goings On:** Exhibitions of visual art; hardcore/punk matinees every Saturday; poetry readings every Sunday afternoon;and COMA, a weekly series of experimental and improvisational music. The facility houses a community darkroom, a silk-screen studio, computer lab facilities, and a zine library, and is also home to the local chapter of Food Not Bombs. • **Fees:** All shows are $6. Use of other facilities is very affordable, in accordance with No Rio's focus on accessibility: $6 an hour for use of the darkroom and silk-screen studio and $2 an hour for the computer center. • **Where the Money Comes From:** About 40 percent of ABC No Rio's budget comes from earned income: proceeds from shows and events, user fees for the darkroom and silk-screen studio, etc. Another 40 percent is grant money from various public and private councils and foundations. The last 20 percent comes from individual donations. The organization accepts no money from corporate donors. • **Claims to Fame:** Artists such as Beck and Michelle Shocked played some of their first shows at ABC No Rio when it was a center of the burgeoning anti-folk scene. The hardcore matinees brought such bands as Born Against, Go!, and Huasipuango. A teenage Ted Leo played his first show with Animal Crackers. And visual artists such as Kiki Smith, Jenny Holzer, and David Wojnarowicz all spent time at No Rio.

SPOTLIGHT:

# ABC NO RIO

**New York City, NY**

*By Kevin Erickson*

*The intention of this action is to show that artists are willing and able to place themselves and their work squarely in a context which shows solidarity with oppressed people, a recognition that mercantile and institutional structures oppress and distort artists' lives and works, and a recognition that artists, living and working in depressed communities, are compradors in the revaluation of property and the "whitening" of neighborhoods.*

- *It is important to focus attention on the way artists get used as pawns by greedy white developers.*
- *It is important for artists to express solidarity with Third World and oppressed people.*
- *It is important to show that people are not helpless — they can express their resentment with things-as-they-are in a way that is constructive, exemplary, and interesting.*
- *It is important to try to bridge the gap between artists and working people by putting artwork on a boulevard level.*
- *It is important to do something dramatic that is neither commercially oriented nor institutionally quarantined — a groundswell of human action and participation with each other that points up currents of feeling that are neither for sale nor for morticing into the shape of an institution.*

- *It is important to do something that people (particularly in the art community) cannot immediately identify unless they question themselves and examine their own actions for an answer.*
- *It is important to have fun.*
- *It is important to learn.*

"The Real Estate Show Manifesto" • 1980

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## FINDING NO RIO

The story of ABC No Rio has been a story about creative engagement with the politics of space. It began on New Year's Eve, 1979, when a group of artists invaded a vacant storefront on Delancey Street on Manhattan's Lower East Side to mount an art exhibit. At the time, the neighborhood was blighted by widespread arson and drug addiction. During the 1970s, thousands of buildings in New York City had been abandoned by their landlords; they became property of the city through foreclosure, and sat vacant and neglected. The art exhibition, entitled The Real Estate Show, was a provocation. Why should the space sit idle? Watching the grainy black-and-white video footage[13] that documented the event, there's a palpable sense of indignant playfulness as trash was cleared away and art crudely taped to walls. Appropriately, neighborhood kids joined in the fun, drawing on the walls and interacting with the sculptures.

The city authorities were not amused. Police padlocked the building and the artwork was rudely confiscated and shipped to a warehouse across town. As one reviewer noted at the time, "The show's basic ideological premise — that artists, working people, and the poor are systematically screwed out of decent places to exist in — could not have been brought home with more brutal irony."[14]

The story could have ended there, had the artists conceded defeat; instead, they chose to fight. The city's reaction seemed overly harsh, and it quickly became an embarrassment. Artists mounted a protest campaign and articles appeared in the media discussing both the art show and the issues it raised,

13 • Available for viewing in *156 Rivington*, a 2003 documentary directed by Andrea Meller.

14 • Lehmann Weichselbaum, "The Real Estate Show," *East Village Eye*, January 1980.

including the city's failure to provide basic improvements to the neighborhood. Fearing further negative publicity, the city's Department of Housing Preservation and Development eventually relented and granted the artists a month-to-month lease for a storefront space a block north on Rivington Street, in an abandoned beauty parlor.

Across the street from 156 Rivington, the artists noticed a sign that originally read *"ABOGADO CON NOTARIO"* — Spanish for "lawyer and notary public." But the sign was badly worn and most of the letters had fallen off; now all that remained was *"AB C NO RIO."* The name is an enduring reminder both of the project's placement in a neighborhood that was once largely Latino, and of the fundamental principles that informed the project: constructive reclamation and reinvention emerging out of urban decay.

Twenty-seven years later, on a sweltering June evening, I'm wandering around the Lower East Side, trying to get my bearings and make it to the opening of an art show. The neighborhood has been through big changes since the Real Estate Show. In the 1980s, cheap (or nonexistent) rent continued to attract artists and bohemians being priced out of their Tribeca and Soho neighborhoods. They lived here alongside the working poor and immigrant communities that had traditionally inhabited the neighborhood. But the so-called new economy of the '90s brought an influx of yuppies and skyrocketing rents, forcing out the neighborhood's traditional populations. Boutique hotels and trendy sidewalk bars have been displacing the bodegas and affordable housing ever since.

In the midst of all these changes, No Rio operates largely under the radar. Neither the remaining working-class immigrants nor the trust-fund hipsters seem to be particularly aware that a landmark center for oppositional culture is operating in their midst. Now hopelessly lost, I poke my head inside the nearest door and ask a bouncer in aviator sunglasses, "Do you know what direction I would need to go to find ABC No Rio?"

"No, but this is a really great bar," he mumbles unenthusiastically.

I finally find it, though: a modest four-story tenement building next door to a matzo factory. The front of the building is dated 1917, but, as I find out later, that's actually the year a new structure was completed atop the original 1860 foundation. As I enter through a welded gate made from reclaimed rebar and old gears, a swarm of butterflies crafted from grapefruit peel hovers above my head. Layers of graffiti and murals

cover the exterior.

A rack of handbills on the stoop gives the details on ABC No Rio's wide-ranging programming and community resource offerings. Pretty much every day of the week, you can find something happening here. Poetry readings, improvised music performances, art shows, and hardcore matinees all take place in the first-floor performance space, where tonight, street artists mingle with punk kids and a few older art enthusiasts who sip wine from plastic cups. The work is stridently political, but not without subtlety. Later, these works will be auctioned off in support of Books Through Bars, an activist group that sends donated books to prisoners nationwide.

Climbing the building's dimly lit staircase, I find the upper floors filled with activity. In the darkroom, a volunteer is showing a father and his two young kids how to print photos. From a nearby meeting room, I hear the familiar din of collective decision making in progress. In the cavernous zine library, another volunteer is just getting ready to lock up for the night.

Each of the projects is operated by its own autonomous collective — entirely volunteer-run. It's the space that makes it all possible. No Rio provides them with an infrastructure, a space, a blank canvas to be filled in, and the tools to do it.

## HOW NO RIO GOT ITS SPACE

The next day, I return to 156 Rivington to talk with Steven Englander, director of ABC No Rio. I want to find out how this came to be — that through all the changes and challenges happening in the neighborhood, the organization has not only remained open and active for more than a quarter-century, but successfully came to own a building.

Steve is the only paid employee at No Rio. He seems to radiate a rare combination of equanimity and infectious determination, making him the kind of person you can immediately identify as a veteran activist. You can also tell he's told this story a million times, but he's happy to retell it once more for me.

Like most of the people who are involved here today, his first taste of No Rio was as a patron — he started coming by in the late '80s for a weekly event called the Wide Open Cabaret, which he describes as "basically one of the first and biggest open-mic type things," featuring poets, avant-garde performance, and musicians playing what was then called anti-folk: a grittier, DIY alternative to the increasingly stale, yuppified

Greenwich Village folk music scene. Steve remembers, "[There was also] a lot of political ranting; at the time, there was much more political ferment in the neighborhood. It was like maybe ten years of the '60s encapsulated into three years in this very small neighborhood."

The Lower East Side has a long history of political radicalism, dating back to the early garment-workers unions and Emma Goldman's residency. In the 1980s, a great deal of the neighborhood's political energy concerned the politics of public space and real estate. In an attempt to "clean up" the neighborhood, police action had intensified in the '80s and early '90s. A 1988 riot in Tompkins Square Park saw police forcefully driving out the homeless and violently clashing with protestors. Squatters who had occupied abandoned buildings were being forced out so the city could auction these vacant buildings to real estate developers. Perhaps the most iconic moment of this conflict was in 1995, when police used an armored personnel carrier — essentially a tank — to invade squatter-occupied buildings on East 13th Street that the city wanted to convert into low-income housing, something many saw as an intermediate step toward handing over the neighborhood to developers at the expense of the poor, people of color, and artists. Officials argued that the squatters contributed to urban disorder. Squatters countered that they were taking responsibility for improving the neighborhood.

ABC No Rio, in addition to its politically oriented cultural programming, served as a meeting place and resource for activists, and became closely associated with the squatters' movement. "Back then," Steve tells me, "a lot of the people who came to No Rio and did stuff here actually lived in the neighborhood. And that's not true anymore, just because of gentrification."

Yet, contrary to some perceptions, ABC No Rio was itself never really a squat, though, as Steve explains, "It sort of depends how you define a squat. When the place opened up, there were times when people who were involved with No Rio were living here. Sometimes it was without the knowledge of the city, sometimes it was with the knowledge of the city — like an informal understanding that the director was living here and that he was going to be the super. And then there were people when the original artists moved in that had leases for apartments." All this time though, ABC No Rio was paying rent to the city in accordance with the terms of its month-to-month lease. "So it was legal, with varying degrees of extralegal situations in the upper floors."

The city of New York was living up to its reputation as a pretty terrible landlord, stretched beyond its means trying to care for the thousands of crumbling buildings it now owned. It fell to the people involved with ABC No Rio to take care of the space. There were massive problems with the heating and plumbing systems. This led to a series of disputes with the city — rent was sometimes withheld to fund repairs, and the city would threaten eviction for nonpayment.

A compromise was eventually reached, but then the city stopped living up to its end of the agreement. Steve remembers, "[Those running the space were] rightly nervous that the city was going to try to evict them again. So they then invited people to move into the upper floors of this building as squatters to defend the building in case the city tried to do a lockout." The city stopped cashing the monthly rent checks and filed eviction papers, claiming that the building wasn't structurally sound. They offered No Rio some alternative sites in Brooklyn, but those spaces were far away from the organization's core audience on the Lower East Side, and they weren't accessible by public transit. It wasn't until this period, in the mid '90s, that squatters took over the upper floors of 156 Rivington — and when they did, it was simply a practical strategy to prevent a lockout.

The battle was fought on multiple fronts. A pro bono legal team did everything possible to hang up the eviction proceedings in court (at one point, No Rio's legal case rested on the city having illegally cut the power to the lightbulb in the building's doorway). Contacts in the media were enlisted to write articles sympathetic to the organization's plight. And protestors took to the streets for a series of demonstrations. No Rio's deep connections to the activist community became vital to its survival, especially since many people saw the eviction as a form of retaliation for No Rio's support of the 13th Street squatters. Public support was broad, and its outpouring was noisy.

While Republican Rudolph Giuliani was mayor, his administration was attempting to deal with the problem of neglected city-owned buildings by transitioning them to private ownership: both wealthy developers and nonprofit housing developers. As a hub of activity for squatters, and as a gritty graffiti-covered building in a gentrifying neighborhood, it was clear that ABC No Rio stood in the way of the city's development plans. So the Department of Housing Preservation and Development tried a new strategy: pitting supporters of low-income housing against supporters of the arts. To that end, the city enlisted a group



Why Are We Building Such a Big Ship? plays ABC No Rio's Saturday matinee. Photo by Kevin Erickson.

called Asian Americans for Equality (AAFE), which was planning a low-income housing project at another city-owned site in Soho. The city made it a condition of the Soho deal that AAFE also take over possession of 156 Rivington Street and convert it into three units of low-income housing.

No Rio began by trying to negotiate with AAFE to rent the first-floor performance/gallery space and let AAFE's residential project proceed on the upper floors. But those negotiations broke down, because AAFE wanted No Rio to pay the market rate — far more than they could possibly afford. Soon, AAFE found themselves the targets of a barrage of protests and letter-writing campaigns for their complicity in the effort to evict ABC No Rio. Protestors swarmed AAFE's Chinatown headquarters, bearing signs accusing AAFE of greed and corruption. As Steve explains, "They were the weakest link. If you're strong enough, you go after your enemy's strength. But in this case it didn't make sense — the easiest thing to do was to go after the person whose foot is on your neck rather than the person behind them." So, rather than focus their energy on fighting the city directly, ABC No Rio supporters worked to make it embarrassing and difficult for AAFE to continue to participate in the development project.

It's not uncommon for the powerful to use wedge tactics that attempt to pit progressive groups against each other. But Steve has no regrets: "AAFE was letting themselves be used. They should have said, 'No, we're not going to participate in kicking out another organization. And if that's what we gotta do, we're not gonna do it.' And we had to bring enormous pressure on them." The campaign definitely embarrassed AAFE, and, before long, they pulled out.

The protest campaign culminated in a sit-in occupation of the offices of New York City's Department of Housing Preservation and Development in February 1997. Protestors snuck into the office of the HPD commissioner at the time, Liliam Barrios-Paoli. As Steve recalls, "Instead of calling the cops, she just invited the protestors into the big conference room and they just talked about stuff for a couple of hours." Barrios-Paoli stunned the activists by actually listening to their concerns and arguments. But the biggest surprise was still to come.

"They scheduled another meeting with ABC No Rio's board of directors and the people who were staying here. And [when] we went to the meeting, the commissioner said, 'We'll sell you the building for $1. You've got to raise the money to renovate it and dedicate it for community use, for your projects and

programs, but we'll give you the building.' "

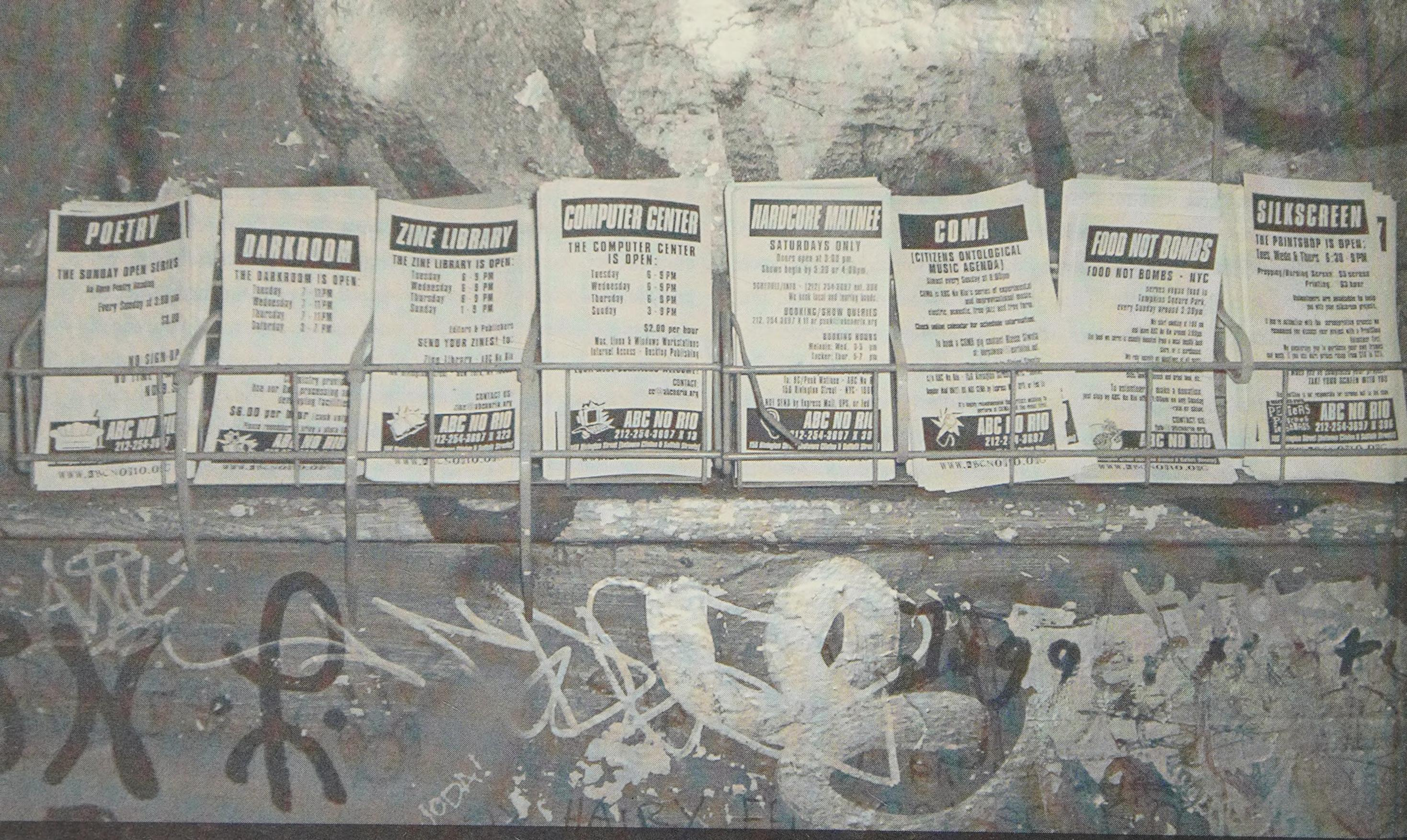
Why this sudden reversal? Steve explains that Barrios-Paoli "was on her way out," about to be put in charge of a different agency, and "was just sort of sympathetic to the protestors." Something of a radical herself during her youth in Mexico, Barrios-Paoli had been present at the Tlatelolco massacre in 1968, and that experience may have informed her response to ABC No Rio's plight. Though her staff wanted to call the police and have protestors forcibly removed, she chose to de-escalate rather than inflame the situation. It's probably significant that Barrios-Paoli was later booted from her post in the Giuliani administration for refusing the mayor's orders to throw welfare recipients off the rolls, and went on to head a Manhattan antipoverty nonprofit called Safespace.

As Steve tells it, "No Rio had, throughout its history, always somehow managed to walk the line between militancy and reputability in the right way so as to end up with a positive tangible result. Like in the beginning, they did that real estate event and the end result was they got a month-to-month lease for the storefront space. And here almost twenty years later, we were fighting them and we did this sit-in — and they ended up selling us the building for $1." It's a tough balance to maintain, but it gets results, especially if you're lucky enough to come across government officials who are willing to listen.

Still, the new deal with HPD didn't mean that No Rio's future was secure. The original plan called for No Rio to raise $100,000 to demonstrate its ability to renovate the dilapidated building. But the city later increased that number, citing rising construction costs. The agreement also stipulated that those people living in ABC No Rio would have to willingly vacate, dooming No Rio's plans for a residential project.

Steve sees this as a lesson about compromise. "The city wasn't going to unconditionally surrender. You know, usually activists lose. You don't get to win that often. So most people realized that we had to get the compromise so that we could claim a victory. If we didn't accept the compromise it would just be one more in a long line of occasions we lost. Fortunately, enough of the community realized that it was worth it for half a dozen people to give up their homes so that thousands of people could benefit."

The benefits became clear as the vacated upper floors enabled the transition to a full-fledged community facility, another condition of the deal. But the entire situation contained a difficult catch-22: without owning the space, it's hard to raise money for




ABC No Rio program handbills in the entrance of the space. Photo by Kevin Erickson

renovations, especially through grants. Yet without grants, No Rio couldn't raise enough money to obtain the space. Luckily, the Bloomberg administration was a little more willing to negotiate than Giuliani's, and in 2004 it was agreed that the construction could be broken into three phases. No Rio would only be required to raise enough money for the first phase of construction before the title transfer could occur.

At last, on June 29, 2006, almost a decade after the sit-in at HPD, the city officially sold the four-story tenement building at 156 Rivington Street to its tenant, ABC No Rio, for the sum of $1.

## THE NOT-SO-CHEAP $1 BUILDING

The transfer of ownership was a huge victory that took years to accomplish, yet it just cleared the way for more challenges. In accordance with the conditions attached to the deal with the city, funds must continue to be raised for the continued renovations.

That task is now a little more complicated than was originally thought. On one of the building's upper floors, Steve walks me over to a portion of the wall where the plaster has fallen away and layers of crumbling brick and mortar have been exposed to reveal just how shoddy and substandard the construction is: The original contractor apparently lied about the building being built up to code.

As it turns out, after consulting with architects and structural engineers about the building's infrastructure. it became clear that that the best, safest plan is to start over from scratch. The cost of rebuilding a new structure on the same site isn't significantly higher than the alternative, radically rehabilitating the old structure with a new steel-framed structure in the shell of the old walls.

Steve is waiting to get the full engineer's report to share with city officials before announcing the plans to rebuild instead of rehab. If he's nervous about the city's potential reaction, he doesn't really let on. "We'll keep them informed of course, as a courtesy," he tells me — but in the meantime the plans are moving forward. He pulls out blueprints and shows me what the new space will look like. The price tag is hefty (now approaching nearly $2 million), but the plans actually seem pretty modest. The performance space and gallery on the first floor and in the basement will be expanded into a portion of the

backyard, to allow for a higher maximum legal occupancy at events. There's a new design emphasis on ecological sustainability, with a green roof, solar cells to provide electricity, and use of recycled and local materials in construction. But the layout is largely the same.

Steve also doesn't seem concerned that the activists and punk kids might consider the construction of an expensive new facility to be an abandonment of the DIY ethics that fuel the project. "I think when we rebuild the building there'll be a slightly different vibe, because the environment you're in can't help but impact your relationship to the space you're in and how you go about working. But I think people will respond by doing better work. For people who perform in this space, the acoustics will be better. We probably won't put in air conditioning, but we'll vent it so it won't be so uncomfortable — there'll be fresh air coming in."

Indeed, I'm a little surprised to find that the volunteers I talk to at the booking collective meeting before the Saturday matinee punk show largely agree that the radical possibilities opened up by sustainability outweigh any attachment to the aesthetics of dilapidation; they're not scared of going legit. They're just stoked on the prospect of having plumbing and heating that always works well, and a ceiling that doesn't look like it's going to collapse on them. Esneider, who has been involved as a performer and volunteer since the early years of the hardcore matinees, has seen how much work has gone into the battle to get this far. But most of the volunteers are young enough — college-age and younger — that fundraising for the acquisition and renovation of the building has always been a central issue. In general, they seem more concerned about pragmatic matters, like how to keep their audience's attention during the fourteen to eighteen months that the 156 Rivington space will have to be closed for construction. Melanie, one of the bookers, tells me the plan is to hold events "in exile" under the ABC No Rio name in partnership with other spaces.

The identity of the project may change in the new building, yet it seems that No Rio has always been changing as different programs develop and grow. It's an institution, but not in a bad way. Where visual art was the initial impetus, performance and video art was the signature form during the '80s. Today, No Rio is best known to many for its association with all-ages punk and hardcore. But even those genre boundaries aren't dogmatic: on the weekend I visit, an eight-piece brass band from New Orleans called Why Are We Building Such a Big Ship? is the headliner

at the Saturday matinee, and the kids go nuts.

Who knows what innovations the next generation of artist-activists will dream up for the new space? While there's something exciting about exalting temporality — reclaiming discarded spaces on the cultural margins while recognizing that they won't last — there's also something permanently radical about endeavoring to build a sustainable project, nurturing a long-term commitment to a particular space, digging your heels in, and making sure that kids have a safe place to gather, work on creative projects, and develop a critical consciousness about their place in the world.

I'm still thinking about this a few hours after the matinee, across the Williamsburg Bridge from No Rio, talking to Todd Patrick, an independent promoter of all-ages shows, trying to get a sense of how No Rio fits into the rest of the city's all-ages scene. A couple hundred kids have crammed into a sweat-soaked warehouse/apartment next door to a salsa bar to see the Dirty Projectors and are now trickling out. Todd's been setting up events like this on a shoestring budget for years now, at a constantly shifting roster of spaces around the city. I note that Todd's model seems to be a novel solution to the challenge of acquiring a space, but he tells me this approach is purely born of necessity: "It's not that I haven't tried," he says. Rather, given the post-Giuliani cultural and legal climate in New York, and the economics of all-ages music (shaky at best), his attempts at acquiring a legit, permanent space thus far haven't been successful. Just two months prior to my visit, Tonic, a beloved venue presenting all-ages avant-garde music and occasional indie-rock shows, was finally priced out of its Lower East Side neighborhood, just as a tower of luxury condos went up next door; it's now one more on the list of casualties of gentrification.

And yet, in the face of all these challenges, ABC No Rio has soldiered on for years and successfully carved out a 4,000-square-foot chunk of possibility. Even in uphill battles, sometimes the good guys win.

●

As this book was about to go to press, Manhattan borough president Scott M. Stringer and City Councilman Alan J. Gerson announced that they had allocated $1.65 million from various city sources to ABC No Rio's efforts to rebuild, citing the resilience and cultural importance of the project. This amount, coupled with ongoing grassroots fundraising and a mysterious

million dollar private donation, means that construction will be able to proceed, and the vision of a rebuilt ABC No Rio will soon become a reality.

●

*Kevin Erickson is AMP's program director. While studying religion and cultural politics at Whitman College in tiny Walla Walla, Washington, he discovered the Pacific Northwest's vibrant underground music scene and soon fell stupidly in love with the radical potential of incubating DIY cultural resistance in small, rural, and geographically isolated communities. He began organizing music events anywhere that people would let him; in basements, living rooms, and legit venues. This led to a three-year stint as a resident worker at Department of Safety in Anacortes, Washington. Kevin is active as a writer, recording engineer, and musician, with one collaboration touted as "intermittently tolerable" by Pitchfork.*

# ABC NO RIO'S SPACE GRAB *IN ONE PAGE*

**What's Worked:**

- Forming alliances with activist communities, both by presenting and incubating art with political content, and by providing a community gathering space, has left ABC No Rio with a small army of activists who will stand up and fight for it when things get rough.
- Deftly walking the line "between militancy and reputability," knowing when and how to work with the authorities, as well as when and how to work against them.
- An endemic, noncapitalist entrepreneurial spirit enables people to do a lot with very few resources, spurring spontaneity and innovation and using the limitations of the physical space in creative ways.

**Issues That Come Up:**

- In a rapidly changing neighborhood, No Rio struggles to stay connected to the people who live nearby.
- Though its volunteer-run programming keeps operating costs low, fundraising for a capital investment presents a big challenge, especially when dealing with a population that doesn't have a lot of deep pockets, yet remains committed to not taking corporate money.

**The Manhattan Factor:**

- New York is one center of the arts universe. Defining what an arts community is in a place with an arts industry and a dramatic daily flow of artists coming in and out is slippery at best. Building it can be even harder.
- On the other hand, ABC No Rio as an organization has more neighbors and sympathizers than anyone else in the country to hit up for support.
- The Lower East Side of Manhattan is one of the top destinations for culture in the world. This means both that it's possible to do improbable things, and that the issue of finding and holding onto space takes more extreme measures than it otherwise would.



Artwork • Sumi Ink Club

CHAPTER SIX

# HUSTLE AND SLOW

## Funding for Youth Music Organizations

*"Money ain't for nothing / It come and then it go*
*So why do we allow it to cause so much woe?"*

Zion I • "Venus"

I asked 125 organizations what the two biggest challenges facing them were. Many people wrote:

1. Money
2. Money

Other folks said:

- Funding
- Financial stability
- Diversified funding sources
- Fundraising

And still others offered more specificity, like needing to buy or repair equipment, to have the ability to offer stipends to low-income youth, and to build a cash reserve in case the rent goes up.

Money was at the top of almost every organization's list, whether they're ten years old with a million-dollar budget, twenty-five years old with a budget of less than $50,000, or 2 years old and don't

know how to make a budget. Unfortunately, money is always an issue.

This chapter will cover different sources of funding, funding phases, and pros and cons of nonprofit funding. Because the overwhelming majority of youth music organizations are nonprofits, this chapter is dedicated to understanding funding from a nonprofit point of view. There are limitations to the traditional nonprofit model, and it's not appropriate for all organizations, but right now, it is the most sustainable option for operating legally. In the long run, organizations should aim to be as close to self-sustaining as possible without pricing out their audience or selling out their community.

## WHAT DOES "CHARITABLE" MEAN?

Being a legal nonprofit means you are doing charitable work. In this country, the legal definition of a nonprofit says you must have a religious, educational, research, or health-related charitable purpose that serves the public good. This means there is a public need that isn't being met by the market or the government. Most of the arts fall under this umbrella as well, because our market economy is not so good for them.

The other piece to understand about what is seen as charitable is that the needs most unmet by the market and government are generally those of communities that do not benefit from race, class, age, gender, and/or citizenship privilege. In the best of worlds, donations flow toward organizations working in those communities first and foremost.

This is why, for example, the work of a collective of mostly white 20-somethings who put on shows for small, exclusive crowds — and not youth in particular — may not be seen as a charitable organization by the government. This does not mean their work isn't valuable or that there isn't some other aspect of it that is charitable. This same group might have a strong case for serving underserved artists through performance opportunities, for example. Still, they would have to couch their work in terms of what is or isn't charitable in order to receive the tax benefits of being a nonprofit and make a strong case for funding.

## WHAT PEOPLE LIKE TO FUND

Following this notion of what is charitable and what is not, there are things within your organization that foundations or donors like to give money to, and things that are harder to fund.

Generally, it's easier to get funding for:

- *Direct Services.* There is a need, and you are directly filling it and not charging the recipients market rates (e.g., people are hungry and you give them food).
- *Specific Programs.* For example, a weeklong summer program or a regularly occurring event. Knowing that people like to fund things in digestible, well-defined chunks should help you think about how to frame some of the ongoing work you do, like calling your shows your Weekly Concert Program.
- *One-Time Capital Expenses.* These are building or equipment costs that you request funds for once, such as renovations or buying new equipment.

It can be harder to get funding in order to pay for things like:

- Rent and utilities
- Repairs and maintenance
- Staff stipends or salaries

These are otherwise known as overhead expenses or general operating expenses. This might seem sort of strange, because without space, people, or equipment, organizations couldn't do what they do. While people don't expect businesses to operate without staff, offices, and marketing budgets, nonprofits are expected to fund those things from sources other than grants. Because of this, when you first start fundraising it can be confusing and sort of frustrating, and you might feel guilty or uncomfortable about asking for money. With time, it will get easier, and you'll start to understand more about different sources of funding, funding cycles, and how to frame your work.

## SOURCES OF FUNDING

The donor pie for nonprofits looks like this: In 2007, of the more than $306 billion given to charities, $229 billion came from individuals (74.8%), $38.5 billion from foundations (12.6%), $23

billion from people leaving money when they die (7.6%), and $15.7 billion from corporations (5.1%).[15] About $13.8 billion went directly to arts and humanities. As a youth music organization, you are in a unique position to benefit from each one of those sources as well as having a leg up in the earned-income department (money you get from charging admission to shows, selling CDs, charging a fee for programs, or from renting your space to others). We'll talk about each area, starting with the ones close at hand — people and shows.

### People Are Your Best Resource

Your most valuable resources in this world of community-based work are people and relationships. Nonprofit success is built on the backs of people working long hours, for little or no pay, freely sharing their relationships, their expertise, and often their manual labor with a cause. When you don't have much money, it's the people donating tons of time and energy that fill in the gaps. A bonus to being an organization with the goal of bringing people together through art and music is that you're already kind of a people magnet.

On the other hand, being a grassroots, DIY, youthful community organization does not necessarily make you a great money magnet. Because your relationship to money is determined by your ability to build relationships with people who have money, there is a significant (and often frustrating and unfair) gap. In this gap there are a lot of forms, paperwork, grant-writing and professional development classes, letter-writing campaigns, and a chain of relationships that have to be built.

On the upside, when you talk to people and build relationships, you're not just making it easier for you to find money, but for money to find you.

For example, because Gavin, one of the founders of Elementz: The Hip Hop Youth Arts Center, talks to *everyone* he meets about what he is up to in Cincinnati, Ohio, the band Pearl Jam had heard about Elementz ten times by the time they rolled through his hometown. They then designated Elementz as the beneficiary of their concert, which resulted in a donation of more than $10,000.

### Benefits and Special Events

The Pearl Jam benefit is a great example of how concerts and special events can be a source of income for your organization.

15 • Giving USA, Giving USA Foundation and the Center on Philanthropy at Indiana University, 2008.

At least one portion of your potential funding audience will be socialite donors. These are people who are more likely to give you money if there is entertainment, socializing, and networking involved. Drinks and snacks are mandatory.

Because event planning is probably within your expertise already, I'll just mention a few things about this kind of fundraising.

First of all, decide what your primary goal is. Special event experts Erin Potts and Deyden Tethong started the Tibetan Freedom Concerts in the 1990s with the Beastie Boys, and run Air Traffic Control, an organization that connects musicians to social causes. When advising people about organizing events, they say you must decide whether you're trying to raise money or raise awareness with an event, because these goals have two different approaches. Trying to do both at the same time is never as effective as focusing on one or the other and sticking to it.

In benefit concerts, the goal is to raise as much money as possible for a cause. You may seek corporate support to do this. You may have higher than normal ticket prices. You may also arrange licensing deals for digital, broadcast, and other rights.

In "message concerts," a term we made up to describe our work and differentiate it from benefits, the goal is to raise awareness; to spread a message.[16]

Also, if you have to raise money to do all-ages music programming, you'll need to figure out a strategy to make your fundraising events more lucrative than your program events. Along with the above suggestions, you may decide to book bigger artists, serve food and alcohol, host raffles or auctions, and invite an older audience.

Special fundraising events run the gamut from house parties to big annual fundraisers. For all fundraising, but especially events-based fundraising, you'll have to spend some money to get some back — established organizations will spend tens of thousands of dollars to net tens of thousands of dollars on an annual fundraiser. When getting off the ground, however, trying to figure out the way to have the least amount of overhead possible is a safer bet. Think DIY wedding where the money and presents go to your nonprofit rather than to the happy couple.

- Find a nice backyard to borrow (no rent)
- Get a great songwriter, vocalist, or spoken-word artist to perform (no PA or equipment necessary).

16 • Erin Potts, "Message vs Benefit Concerts," www.becausestrategies.com February 12, 2007.

- Hit up a grocery store for a donation to buy barbecue supplies, and get a donated (root beer) keg.
- Ask different people in the community to be hosts, which means they will invite their friends and networks (no advertising necessary).
- Make a fundraising pitch right before or after the artist lulls an audience with a full belly.

In this case, you'll still need to spend money on plates, napkins, cups, ice, possibly rented tables and chairs, and other incidentals — but if the situation is right, you might be able to ask your hosts to buy that stuff as a donation as well.

There are pros and cons to focusing lots of energy on fundraising events. They often don't raise as much as they cost in organizational time and resources. On the positive side, they generate a sense of community, connection, and all-around good vibes. They are a lot of work and a lot of fun.

**Government**

Depending on where you live, who your elected officials are, and what kind of programs for music and youth already exist in your community, you might be able to get funding from your local government. You may be surprised how many nonprofits get government money. When I interviewed Seattle city council member Richard Conlin, he told me that cities contract nonprofits to do some of their work because nonprofits are so much more efficient and flexible. (Refer to the aforementioned donated labor phenomenon.) The flipside is that nonprofits are also easier to reduce or cut funding to than a city department.

There are two kinds of funding streams in government:

- The kind you apply for through grants.
- The kind you lobby for. This is where you're added to a departmental budget or to the general fund budget of a city, county, or state by justifying the expenditure and applying public pressure.

In an interview with James Keblas, another founder of the Vera Project and a particularly gifted fundraiser and networker, he said that to get government funding you must identify either a sympathetic leader or a pot of money. It's good advice for all fundraising, really.

# TO BE OR NOT TO BE A GOVERNMENT PROGRAM

At the time we started Vera in Seattle, there was a necklace of government-run teen centers serving as all-ages music venues surrounding the city itself — where there was no all-ages venue left standing. The suburbs' successes were largely because of the hard work and influence of Kate Becker and her 1992 founding of the Old Fire House in Redmond, Washington, a city-funded teen center with all-ages shows and music programming. The OFH became the epicenter for up-and-coming bands, a place for young people to hang out and access social services, and a model for other suburbs to replicate. The consistency of programming, youth ownership, the mayor's support, and Kate's willingness to constantly put her job on the line to break some of the irrational city restrictions allowed the OFH to build up a vibrant music scene that spilled over into the surrounding communities and Seattle. Bands like Modest Mouse, the Blood Brothers, and Akimbo grew up or played some of their first shows at the OFH.

By the time Kate joined the Vera Project team, however, her input about that experience convinced the three of us that going the independent nonprofit route was worth trying, and probably easier to sustain in a city like Seattle.

The financial benefit of being part of a local government body is to establish permanency from the get-go and hopefully be granted a space and operating money. In places where there aren't a lot of other nonprofits, but there is a pretty good tax base of families with money (like suburbs), this is a very viable route that comes with some stability. It does, however, take a fearless leader who can wade through the endless paperwork and meetings to ensure that the space stays open and active while standing up to criticism from both sides — for being too bureaucratic (to the music community) and for being too much of an outsider (within government agencies). There are some severe restrictions as well, often entailing battles over ownership, definition of the space, and the kinds of programs provided.

A sympathetic public official might look like:

- A public official with a teenage daughter or son
- A city council person who starts public meetings with a performance by a local artist
- An alderman spotted at a concert
- A deputy mayor who is always attending arts events or fundraisers for youth

It's probably not:

- A city attorney or someone working in risk management. These folks are usually the ones who write laws banning all-ages shows. But, hey, anyone can warm up to the idea.

Lurking pots of money might exist in the form of matching grants, summer programming grants, event sponsorships, or, with some work, budget line items with your name in it in the following areas:

- Department of neighborhoods
- Arts and cultural commissions (though these guys and the human services department are often woefully underfunded)
- Parks and recreation departments
- Economic development or cultural tourism offices
- Juvenile justice divisions
- Music, film, or entertainment offices
- General or discretionary funds: unassigned money that everyone is trying to get a piece of

Once you've established a rapport with someone in your local government, you can simply ask them where in the budget there could be money for a program like yours. It's their job to know that stuff and tell you. At this point, you'll probably have to have a repeat conversation with as many other public officials as possible until you think you have the seed planted, a critical mass of support, and some knowledge of where the money could be. Hopefully someone offers to put you in the budget, but if that's not happening, you may just have to ask. Building a relationship with local government is something we address in-depth in the next chapter.

**Foundations**

When we first started fundraising, I thought foundations were rich, objective institutions that would give you money if you had a decent idea, could write a complete sentence, and could

add and subtract. Totally psyched, I wrote Vera's first grant application and was rejected. Why?

- Because we didn't really fit within their guidelines.
- Because we weren't serving a more narrowly defined youth population.
- Because we were a new organization.
- And because I had never written a grant before.

So what I learned then, and am still learning now, is that raising money through foundations requires relationships built over time. It usually takes two to several years before foundations start paying attention to a new organization, mostly because they want to see a proven track record and things like program evaluations and audited financial statements.

Also, foundations operate on their own timelines, and these schedules aren't always transparent or in sync with yours. Most important, I learned that writing a compelling grant proposal takes practice, a great mentor, and wicked proofreading. Yes, I just said wicked.

Foundations have their own agendas and missions, just the way organizations do. Much like the way you might look for another nonprofit to team up with on a particular show or program, foundations are looking for program partners to achieve their social, political, or environmental goals. The people with the money who make the decisions are usually sitting on the foundation's board, and their staff people, usually called program officers, tend to be people more familiar with what programs need and the issues they are facing, who interpret the proposals in terms of the foundation's goals and pass the information along to the board.

Foundations revise their guidelines all the time, often to answer the call of current crisis. Some foundations are old-money institutions established with money from destructive industries, and others are small family foundations. Some have bureaucratic processes that feel endless, and some will write checks without an application. They come in all stripes, including ones started by rock 'n' roll/pop/hip-hop stars.[17]

Organizations like the ones in this book exist within and between a lot of program areas that foundations define as youth development, youth engagement, youth leadership, youth organizing, youth media, community development, arts presentation, arts education, civic engagement, and grassroots activism.

Sometimes foundations combine those words in weird, vague

17 • Some are listed in our online resources.

ways and don't explain them, and sometimes they are very explicit. For example, a foundation with the goal of bringing music into the lives of youth might only fund a training for music teachers in a particular city to run after-school programs.

Because a lot of work needs to be done to bridge the gap between institutional funders and the local music-organizer kids who are making stuff happen, the majority of youth music organizations are getting no play from the foundation scene. That's partly because youth music programs are underresourced professionally to do all the things necessary to apply for, receive, and report back on grants. Professional development is almost nonexistent in this field. On the other hand, foundations need to be shown that this work is not about funding popular music (a commercial enterprise) merely for entertaining and distracting youth from the bad stuff, but about an artistic form that is critical in shaping cultural identity and building communities.

Sometimes pointing out the darker side of music's cultural influence — like how music has been used to recruit young people into white power and neo-Nazi movements, or how the sudden expansion of church-based music venues provides powerful modes of outreach and retention for conservative religious movements, some of which promote a regressive political agenda and are racist, sexist, and homophobic — starts to shed some light on the importance of grassroots music initiatives that involve youth.

Hip-hop organizations have largely led the charge to bridge the gap between funders and music communities in the positive sense, by putting more emphasis on the other charitable aspects of their work, like making otherwise expensive equipment and lessons accessible to lower-income youth, folding political dialogues and leadership opportunities into their work, addressing racial and economic justice issues, and organizing a cross-generational community.

In the foundation world, measurements are key. On paper, foundations want to see "metrics" (statistics) about your work, like:

- "X many people have come to our show" — to demonstrate how many youth you serve through concerts.
- "A gazillion bands want to perform here" — to demonstrate the overwhelming demand from artists, and that there are not enough performance venues.
- "So-and-so sold X number of CDs, averaging three per trip made on the subway" — to demonstrate how much income is made by and for a young person through your record program.

In person, the statistics are less compelling than personal stories and narrative. This is the anecdotal evidence that makes people see and feel your program even when they haven't done a site visit yet. Slide shows, short videos, and quotes are super helpful.

Here are some guidelines about how to approach foundations.

- *Research.* Do some research on possible funders by looking at who supports other nonprofits similar to yours, or by checking out the Foundation Center's database (www.foundationcenter.org). Prioritize the prospects by deadline and likely fit.
- *Introductory Phone Call, E-mail, or Meeting.* For the foundations that take unsolicited proposals, call and talk to a program officer to see if it seems like your organization is a good fit before you work on a proposal. If it seems pretty obvious that you're a good candidate, try to get a face-to-face meeting to have this discussion and be ready to make a presentation. If a foundation doesn't take unsolicited proposals but is an obvious fit and lists staff and board members, see if anyone in your network knows any of them and could make an introduction.
- *Proposal.* You'll either be asked to submit a letter of inquiry (LOI) or a full proposal or both. An LOI is usually a one- to three-page narrative summarizing your organization's work and the project you are proposing. A full proposal will entail a longer narrative, a copy of your IRS tax exemption letter (or a letter from your fiscal sponsor), bios of staff and board members, demographic information about your organization's leaders and constituents, and, of course, a detailed budget and financial statements. Most foundation websites will list the groups they have funded and sometimes they'll actually post other organizations' applications for you to look at. This is all public information, and it's helpful for you to look at in terms of understanding what projects and language resonate with them. You can also find out how much they generally give by looking at their tax returns (called 990 forms), which are available on the Foundation Center website and in databases like Guidestar (www.guidestar.org).
- *Feedback.* Get someone to read over your proposal. If you have specific foundation-related questions, call and ask the program officer for help.
- *Wait.*

If you receive a grant, do a little dance with the check in your hand.

If you get turned down, follow up. Call the program officer again to get specific feedback and ask if you should reapply.

In the end, the hardest part of applying for grants is resisting the impulse to change your programs to fit the guidelines of foundations, and the fact that you have to submit many, many applications in order to get one grant. Ultimately, you'll do the best work in staying true to who you are and doing what you do best. So just keep trying.

**Corporations**

Businesses have two types of giving: marketing and philanthropic. This is an important distinction to make as you are looking for gifts from them. As a product-producing, audience-building organization, you are in a unique position to get support from lots of different companies in both realms.

Marketing money is given out to expose your audience to a brand, often in the form of an event sponsorship. Sponsorship is an exchange. Your organization will get a certain amount of money and/or product for providing exposure to a certain amount of people through various means. You have to do your research to see who is a good fit for your audience. You should ask yourself, "Do the people who participate here like this company, and does it seem like the company is interested in this demographic?" If the answer is no to either half of the question, keep looking.

Companies want different things in exchange for their sponsorship. Some companies want their banners plastered all over everything, and other companies are way into viral marketing and are counting on the word-of-mouth association to your organization to get them cred.

Philanthropic money usually comes through a company's affiliated foundation or an employee matching-gift program, and doesn't require the same kind of name recognition. These foundations allow corporations to get tax write-offs on their income, and are part of their strategy for demonstrating corporate responsibility.

Taking money from corporations is something that there is a wide range of feelings about in music and youth organizing communities, and it can be hard to avoid contradiction. The presence or absence of corporate sponsorship in our organizations varies from genre to genre, and even within genres from

artist to artist and space to space.

For community-based music organizations, the biggest factor to consider for community-based music organizations in working with commercial interests is *scale*. Yes, it makes sense to work with local record stores, coffee shops, and retailers, but can the same be said of all corporations? Aside from needing to get money and taking it from wherever we can get it, what are the larger implications?

The late nineties anti-globalization movement brought to light how most major multinational corporate success comes from questionable human rights and environmental practices. One corporate strategy for overcoming the resulting consumer skepticism has been deliberately linking up with anti-establishment artists and organizations in order to look more trustworthy, progressive, and hip, sometimes without asking, as in the case of Nike coopting a Minor Threat record cover.[18] This tactic serves to distance important cultural products from their original cause, reducing once pragmatic or socially responsible consumer choices down to fashion statements. Though you may not have car and cell phone companies beating down your door yet, now's your time to figure out where you stand on corporate funding.

Some people feel strongly that associations with certain kinds of corporations can water down their mission and message, while others see taking big corporate money as a way to make their work more powerful and reach more people. Local punk festivals, hip-hop battles, and rock shows are all things that are sometimes heavily sponsored and sometimes are not.

Outside of the multinationals, corporate support comes in a variety of ways. It might come in the form of cash or, more likely, through goods and services (called in-kind donations). Support could come from sound equipment companies, instrument stores, record labels, your friend's dad's accounting firm, the radio station your cousin works at, or the print shop your friend works at.

Regardless of where you stand on whether or not you will work with large corporations, local businesses and the ones most closely related to your work are still going to be your biggest allies. They often have less cash but more love to give, and support that lasts over time. If that record store can't give you money, maybe one day it will sell your benefit compilation without taking a cut of the sales, like all the independent record stores in Seattle did to help Vera fundraise.

18 • Robert Levine, "A Nike Poster Upsets Fans of the Punk Rock Band Minor Threat in a Major Way," *New York Times*, July 4, 2005.

Ultimately, you have the power to set the terms of a partnership with a corporate funder, especially when negotiating a sponsorship. If having a banner on your stage is against your ethos, you can find a more discreet place to put it. Make sure you've stipulated when and where a company's name is to be displayed or announced. If your constituency is sensitive to corporate associations, try to work it out so that you recognize your corporate sponsors in exactly the same way you would recognize an individual donor. Take the extra time to make sure everyone understands what is expected of them.[19]

**Individuals**

When you start asking individual people for money, at first donations will come from your roommate, your parents, your sister, and your eighth-grade teacher, and they'll total $50. By the time your organization is five years old, donations from individuals can total thousands of dollars — and it's because there are more people involved in your work, and their roommates, parents, siblings, and teachers are all pitching in. Hopefully some of them make loads of money or work for companies with donation-matching programs. One thing you can count on is that this pot of money will constantly expand if you are continually asking and sincerely thanking people — even the $5 donors.

There is a ton of research done and books written on the subject of fundraising from individuals. Proposed strategies range from getting super-mathematical, proposing formulas to understand the psychology of donor brains, to advising you to shimmy on up to the almost-dead so that you might get a piece of their estate ($17 billion!). Since that seems a little far-fetched (not to mention creepy) for this particular crew of youthful organizations, it might make more sense for us to look to the "almost graduated" instead and start up an alumni donor program.

Here are the main two things you need to know:[20]

- If you ask a person face-to-face for support, there is a 50 percent chance they will give you a donation. If you ask them any other way — through e-mails, letters, phone calls, or events — the probability of a gift is 15 percent or less, usually much less.
- Most individual donations are made by people who are middle and working class. You do not need to know wealthy philanthropists in order to increase your individual donors.

19 • For suggested further reading on the issue of corporations marketing to youth, consult our online resources at allages.net/manualfesto.

20 • Kim Klein & Stephanie Roth, "Choosing the Right Fundraising Strategy," *Grassroots Fundraising Journal*, June 1999.

# MY EXPERIENCE WORKING WITH CORPORATIONS

While I worked at the Vera Project, we continuously negotiated our relationship to corporations. We said no to a grant that turned affordable yoga classes into a marketing opportunity for Kraft and Phillip Morris, and then, a couple years later, said yes to a fundraising partnership with a radio station that was owned by Clear Channel because they had decided to focus on promoting local music. Having a major radio station pushing local musicians while being part of a media conglomerate that threatened local infrastructure created an interesting situation: local Seattle music became more fashionable and Vera became more well-known but also sort of detached from our underlying ethics of DIY. At the end of the year, the radio station gave $70,000 to Vera, but decided to cancel the local show and fire the DJ's — because, no matter how cool it was, local music wasn't bringing in the dough. This was a good reminder that companies are companies after all; even if they have a lot of great people working for them, they have to answer to a bottom line and not a social or artistic mission. Being a supporter of Vera gave them a PR leg to stand on and say that they weren't entirely selling out the local scene. And, without their financial support and exposure, Vera wouldn't have been able to make the leap into a more permanent home and reach thousands of new participants. Thus, the organization prioritized financial stability over ideals with no regrets. The question of when to do that is something of a never-ending dilemma when running arts-based nonprofits, which is one reason why many organizations will avoid working with corporations altogether and operate on a scale that keeps them free from having to compromise their independence.

For Vera, on the other hand, the most important ethic has always been member guidance, which is why partnership decisions like these are run through a committee.

It's best to approach individuals when you have a really compelling and time-sensitive reason — like a new program or a matching grant challenge — so there is a sense of urgency to it. You want to tell people in advance of meeting that you're going to ask them for money, so they know it's coming. Say, for example, "I was wondering if I could sit down with you to talk about whether or not you can support this project." Many people say the rule of thumb is to meet with someone once just to introduce them to the project and ask for their advice (other possible contacts or funders) and then meet with them again to ask them for monetary support.

Finally, you want to make sure you have a way to track who has given you what, what the money was for, and if you have followed up and thanked them. This can be a simple spreadsheet or a database. If you have the resources for it, you can invest in software to help you.

**Earned Income**

Ana Gallegos y Reinhart, who founded Warehouse 21 Teen Arts Center in Santa Fe, New Mexico, is making the move to bring more earned income streams into her organization's budget as it moves into a new building in the downtown arts district. This means that Warehouse 21 is doubling its performance spaces so that they can potentially rent out a space, and starting a multitude of small arts- and media-based businesses that employ young people (printing T-shirts, doing design, video editing, etc.).

Almost all youth music organizations are earning money by having shows, selling records, and charging fees for classes. Even though your earned income may not actually be paying the rent, or even paying for your posters, it's important to account for it as revenue. Contrary to what a lot of people think, if you're operating aboveground, it looks good to be generating some money, because it makes you look somewhat self-sufficient. Since you'll be consistently attracting an audience that's willing to pay a small amount for some of your programming, you can figure out how to leverage that to support your organization. The 924 Gilman Street Project does this through $2 membership cards that you have to buy every year to go to shows. If they do 100 shows a year that attract at least 100 people, and half of those people are new to the space, they make $10,000 while offering an incentive for people to come back (it will be $2 cheaper).

Once you get going, you have the ability to make money

from a wide variety of things such as:

- Membership
- Ticket sales
- Record sales
- Class fees (even if they are small)
- Venue rentals for rehearsals, private events, meetings, other shows (if you have your own space)
- T-shirts and merchandise
- Consulting on event planning

If you are a nonprofit and charge for everything, however, or don't provide scholarships, trade, and ways for people with different economic backgrounds to be involved, your charitable status will come into question. Plus, you won't be attracting as vibrant a crowd, because you'll be limiting who can participate.

## FUNDING PHASES

Here is a very basic framework for thinking about cycles of funding:

Seed Funding

⇩

Capacity-Building Funding

⇩

Sustaining Funding

You need seed money to get going and establish a track record. You then want to refine your work and expand the good parts, building capacity to do more and do it better. And then you want to sustain the work as long as it's successful, until you have to invent a new method, new program, or new organization and you start the process again.

### Seed Money

When you're looking for seed money, the best scenario is getting one lump sum from one or two people who are willing to take a risk on your idea without having a lot of strings attached. It can be more difficult, though not impossible, to galvanize a large group of community members to chip in before there is anything tangible. If you have a long-standing good reputation in a community, good relationships, or there is a crisis that your project can solve with some immediacy, a

community fund drive can work.

The idea of a pilot program comes in handy (see Chapter 8) when thinking about what you should do and how much money you should try to raise when you're starting out. Take one sliver of your overall vision and define exactly what you want to do and for how long (put out 500 copies of one record, offer three months of classes, or put on eight shows over two months). Then try to think of who might have a stake in seeing your project succeed, and the funding available to support it.[21]

Some potential sources for seed money:

- Social entrepreneurship grants: There are a few national agencies and some local ones that are solely in the business of funding start-ups. They are sort of like venture capitalists for socially beneficial things.
- Your local government, as in the case of the Vera Project.
- Another nonprofit that could benefit from and help fundraise for a project like yours.
- Rich people.

21 • A sample budget can be found in our online resources at allages.net/manualfesto.

At the urging of Kate Becker, who had way more experience than James or me, we agreed that the Vera Project wouldn't do any programming without getting funding first. We wouldn't wear out favors and go into large amounts of personal debt to make it happen. If the community wanted it, the community would fund it.

But our immediate community didn't have any money to contribute when we were trying to get off the ground. James and I were still in college, and Kate was responsible for trying to keep another organization afloat. We tried to do some benefit concerts and learned quickly that it was something of a futile effort. It was like we were having benefit shows to raise money to pay the costs of our benefit shows.

Because there was literally no place for young people to go to see music and the city wasn't spending any money on nighttime activities for youth, we took the hard-line stance that a permanent all-ages venue wasn't optional, it was critical. But we didn't ask the city to fund a permanent venue. Instead, we asked them to fund a yearlong trial program where we put on one show a week. Then they could evaluate our work and decide if they wanted to go further.

In the end, the city of Seattle gave us $25,000 from the general fund and more money from other departments that by the

end of the year totaled $75,000. At the time, I barely had a context for what $25,000 was other than $2,000 more than my age times a thousand, and about three times what I usually made in a year.

We ended up putting a couple grand on our personal credit cards to cover some bureaucratic costs (a pesky debt I'm still figuring out how to pay it off!), but we waited on buying equipment, paying for space, etc. until we had the funding. We also hustled for in-kind donations and got a PA, a cash box, and some stamps.

We hoped that by assigning a value at the beginning, we would set a precedent for getting people to invest in the future. We knew this made it more likely that people would continue to grow the vision after we burnt out, aged out, and started listening to soft rock and neo-soul.

**Capacity Building**

Capacity building is nonprofit lingo for saying, "We want to do more of what we are doing, better." In other words, you want to grow. People also like to say "grow to scale," meaning that an organization tries to get big enough (scales up) to address all of the issue they were founded to deal with, instead of addressing one tiny part of it, as most nonprofits do.

Maybe I'm stating the obvious, but in this economic system, even with nonprofits, people like to invest in growing things. Getting caught in the growth-for-growth's-sake mentality isn't necessarily helpful, but in the case of most youth music groups, its safe to say we could all build our capacity.

Capacity building is both a buzzword you can throw around to get funders to pay attention and a useful way of thinking about how to survive, overcome growing pains, and push your organization to the next level.

Some ways you build capacity (and things to propose to funders):

- *Write a strategic plan or business plan.* Long before Vera ever got a dollar out of foundations for programming, we got a $10,000 grant to write a strategic plan. Ten thousand dollars for planning before we ever got a dime for doing music programming! At first it seemed nuts, but, truthfully, it is one of the best things we ever did.
- *Increase the reach of a successful program.* Maybe you could put on shows or teach classes in another neighborhood that needs it. Maybe if you hired another staff person,

you could teach twice as many classes.

- *Create an evaluation system.* Evaluating what you do takes time and resources, especially if you want to do it well and be able to do it over and over again. This is one that is especially good to involve foundations in. Because they see so many proposals and often fund research on their program areas, they know a lot about good metrics.
- *Expand a space, extend a lease, buy equipment.* Sometimes funders will see this as capital funding; you can also fold these into something else (like program expansion) to make it a capacity-building grant.

When you're going after capacity-building funding, you need some things like:

- Documentation of what you do and what has worked.
- Evidence that proves that there's demand for more of it.

The best place to go for capacity-building money is to donors who already know you, even if they haven't funded you. Foundations are the best sources for capacity-building grants, but if you have connections to wealthier people, individual major donors (as people who give big chunks of cash are called in the nonprofit world) can also be a good source.

**Sustaining Funding**

Funding that sustains you is money that comes in year after year from individual donations and earned income. While grants and corporate gifts may come once or twice and be restricted, a solid pool of income from individual donations and ticket/record sales will help pay your overhead and operating expenses like rent, utilities, salaries, office supplies, etc.

To reiterate much of what was said earlier about raising money from individuals, sustaining money comes from developing donors at all levels, membership programs, earned income streams, and constantly reaching out to new people. To maintain and grow this funding, you have to make clear, consistent ways for people to give you money or buy things — e.g., email and mail solicitations, membership cards, and annual fundraisers, along with tickets, records, T-shirts. You should also be careful about not crossing the line into being intrusive or obnoxious.

Because we are all subjected to so many funding requests from for-profits and nonprofits, doing individual solicitations needs to be catered to your needs and community.

For instance, 1919 Hemphill in Fort Worth, Texas, tells you exactly how much money they need every month to pay rent on

their website next to a "donate" button. This is a great example of a clear, consistent, non-boring way they ask for individuals to step up to the plate and help sustain them. Then you get to watch the number go down, which is really gratifying.

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## SURVIVAL IN NONPROFIT FUNDRAISING

First of all, buckle up. That this chapter is one of the longest in the book gives you an idea of how much work lies ahead. By following the nonprofit model, you have to expend a lot of energy to raise money; all the while, trying to maintain quality programs and keeping your overhead low. You may spend a long time working on relationships that go nowhere. You'll get rejected countless times, and, when money comes in, you might have mixed feelings about how you got it or what it means.

To be frank, part of this is because being exempt from paying income tax does not exempt you from the dysfunctions of our economy. In this stage of global capitalism, the United States' reliance on exploitation of people and natural resources for wealth is making things really volatile, including the funding streams that come through major institutions. It's also creating a whole new slew of fires that nonprofits and funders are constantly trying to put out (natural disasters and crashing housing markets), so they may feel like arts and youth are less of a priority.

On the other hand, I've come to learn that fundraising isn't separate from program work. It's just as much a part of changing things as programs or services, especially when you think about individual donations as a base-building strategy. Plus, it can feel really great to see all your work pay off, or to go through the grueling process of writing a grant and come out on the other side with a clear sense of what you're going to do in the year ahead.

Many youth music organizations have been able to dissolve the boundary between those being served by programs and those doing the serving, and a handful of them have done this financially as well. As organizations get older and expand their bases, the possibilities of sustainability expand.

One of the most compelling stories of a small collective growing into a thriving, self-sustaining institution is that of AS220 in Providence Rhode Island. I know it sounds highly unlikely, but imagine that some idealistic, smart, and scrappy as hell artists/organizers waged a revolution in the name of underground

arts in their community, focusing on the empty and struggling downtown corridor. Then imagine that they won — really won. Instead of this or that department store or chain restaurant with condos up top, think about three huge buildings of artists' live/work spaces (that are real artist live/work spaces, not just high-priced lofts for architects and software developers), a community silk-screen studio, a darkroom, a visual art studio, a computer lab, a recording studio, an art gallery, and performance venues. In 2008, AS220's budget was pushing the $1.5 million mark, funded primarily from earned income, while keeping their core values of equal pay for all staff and unjuried, uncensored, always all-ages arts presentation. Viva you-know-what.

YMR meets the Rhode Show.

# AS220

## VITALS

**Located:** Providence, Rhode Island • **Founded:** 1985 • **Organization Type:** Nonprofit community arts center • **Music Genre of Focus:** Everything: punk, indie rock, experimental, acoustic, hip-hop, and more. The AS220 club draws loads of independent touring bands. • **Goings On:** AS220 is a massive arts organization. It maintains a nightclub with music almost every night of the week, a recording studio, a silk-screen studio, performance spaces, a community darkroom, nineteen live/work studios, four galleries, the Broad Street Studio (a youth program), and a recently renovated bar and café. They own three buildings and counting in downtown Providence. • **Fees:** Youth are paid to participate in the Broad Street Studio, shows range from free to $6, and classes cost $25 per four-hour block (e.g., a three-block class would cost $75). • **Where the Money Comes From:** The majority of the $1.3 million budget is earned revenue from AS220's commercial and residential properties, with the exception of its youth program, Broad Street Studio, which is grant-supported ($400,000 per year); AS220 makes additional earned income from its bar, shows, and galleries. • **Founding Story:** AS220 founder Umberto (Bert) Crenca is one-in-a-million. He founded AS220 in 1985, when he was leaving a marriage and recommitting himself to life as an artist. Bert started this artists' collective with a ramshackle space, the motorcycle gang Satan's Serpents for security, $800, and a commitment to artistic freedom. • **Claims to Fame:** AS220 anchors the underground and emerging arts community in downtown Providence, while also being a well-known touring spot for bands from all over the world. Its live/work space and performance venues and galleries ensure that artists won't suffer from Providence's economic revival, but instead get to help shape it. • **The Local Scene:** Providence seems up-and-coming. AS220 was established long before this, when downtown was strip clubs, empty buildings, and scary. There's a strong mafia vibe in Providence; we actually saw the guy who played Big Pussy on *The Sopranos* in our hotel lounge signing autographs on rolls of duct tape. The mayor who helped get AS220 its first building is now in jail (due to unrelated acts, of course).

SPOTLIGHT:

# AS 220

**Providence, RI**

*By Chris Wiltsee*

*AS220's philosophy: To provide a space for all artists who need a place to exhibit, perform, or create their original artwork, especially those who can't get that space from traditional sources because of financial or other limitations.*

It's a long journey from Oakland, California, to Providence, Rhode Island, but that was an adventure that Jhamel, a 17-year-old artist from Youth Movement Records, and I were eager to make in order to witness the much-heralded arts organization AS220. Over the next two days, we would have the chance to meet their founder and staff, enjoy their summer street fair, the Foo Fest, and tour their numerous facilities. We both considered this a great opportunity to learn and "soak game" from a veteran institution.

Neither one of us really knew what to expect from Providence and, if anything, our expectations were pretty low. There's nothing like blowing out low expectations. The Providence that we discovered was thoroughly charming. We counted at least four free music and arts events going on downtown that weekend, and the architecture was beautiful and historic. We had no idea. Jhamel kept saying, "I've gotta bring my girlfriend here someday. This is a romantic-ass town!"

After getting our bearings, we met the generous and upbeat Rhode Show coordinator, David Gonzalez, who would serve as our tour guide and host throughout the weekend. The Rhode Show is the youth hip-hopera performance troupe associated with Broad Street

Studios, AS220's youth arts program. They were scheduled to perform at the Foo Fest later that afternoon. The Foo Fest is essentially a big block party and street fair that goes down each summer in front of AS220's main space. It boasts a stage with live music, an outdoor record store, a huge array of local arts vendors, a theater with more music and art, and the AS220 café. It's a relaxed and funky community scene.

David was just as eager to learn about YMR as we were about AS220. The Broad Street Studio, founded in 2001, is their youngest program. It has three core areas, which mirror the core areas of the larger AS220 offerings: music and performing arts, visual arts, and literary arts. Bert and David say that they are still fine-tuning the youth program's design and focus.

The Broad Street Studio draws almost all of its youth from the local training school, which is essentially juvenile hall. Youth are paid a stipend to get involved in the program as visual artists, musicians, poets, and performers. The most celebrated project of the Broad Street Studio is the Rhode Show, which produces inspiring, high-energy hip-hop and pushes positive and progressive social themes. The production quality is high, and everybody takes a great deal of pride in their process and finished product.

The Broad Street Studio got its name from its original location on the other side of the tracks, in one of Providence's lower-income neighborhoods, where most of the youth within the program actually live. For a time, AS220 ran its youth program at a facility in that neighborhood because of its proximity to the youth. There were problems, however, with the original Broad Street Studio facility, and so ultimately they brought the program downtown into the AS220 facility. Bert reflected that the existence of the youth program within AS220 was a very "healthy and challenging thing" for the organization's community and constituents. Like all American cities, there is a great disparity between the haves and have-nots, one that falls heavily along lines of color and geography. The presence of low-income youth of color, in Bert's words, helps to keep the organization "from becoming too artsy-fartsy."

We were shown around the main AS220 facilities, and there was no way to escape being impressed. The historic downtown building boasts the AS220 club, with another theater being opened next door; a fully functioning and popular café; and studios upstairs, including a mini silk-screening factory, a recording lab, and several multipurpose spaces. We

caught up with the Rhode Show youth, who were about ten deep and basically lounging before rehearsal. They were in their late teens, mostly African-American, and very welcoming. Jhamel later commented, "When you look at their building, you might expect that they're going to be a bunch of stuck-up rich kids, but actually, they come from the same neighborhood that I come from."

The crowd outside had swollen into the hundreds in the early-afternoon summer sun, and a rockabilly band was strumming on the main stage when we were introduced to AS220's founder, Bert Crenca. We sat at the corner restaurant with Providence's charismatic king of the underground, while he gave us his founding story over a choice piece of filet mignon. There is no way to miss Bert's sharp intelligence, stubborn insistence on artistic integrity and freedom, and charismatic leadership. Bert is true East Coast and deeply local. In 1985, he set out to create some space for himself and other underground artists in Providence. Today, the success of AS220 is simply staggering.

## IT'S IN THE BRICK

Talking to Bert, you quickly come to understand that the philosophy of AS220 hasn't changed much, if at all, since its inception. They have successfully maintained their commitment to "outside" art and artists, keeping all shows and events uncensored, unjuried, and accessible. What has changed is tied up in the rags-to-riches story of going from renegade underground collective to major downtown arts institution. The early AS220 that Bert described ran exclusively on an engine of elbow grease and do-it-yourself ingenuity. That hasn't changed much either, but it is clear that when Bert got the former mayor of Providence to help broker a deal for AS220 on their first building, it was a sea-change moment. After a $300,000 renovation they had their first home.

Fifteen years later, AS220 owns three buildings in downtown Providence, allowing the organization space for its venues, exhibitions, artists, and offices, and creating a self-sustaining revenue stream for their programs and projects. AS220 rents some of its storefront property to a high-end restaurant, a convenience store, a barbershop (which is rumored to be a mob meeting place), and other downtown establishments. The

cornerstone of AS220's offerings these days is its ability to offer deeply subsidized housing for artists in its beautifully restored downtown buildings. Ownership means that they can offer this service forever, keeping the arts alive and vibrant despite massive overall commercial investment in and gentrification of the area. For those of us who've seen great arts districts get "discovered" and then become former arts districts, we know just how critical this point is.

Even with all this success, there was never a financial windfall moment for the organization, just slow and steady work for nearly two and half decades, though they have received at least one sizeable multi-year grant.

The only program not fully sustained through the organization's property management is the Broad Street Studio, which is funded almost exclusively through foundation grants. AS220's youth programs were initially fully funded through the federal tobacco settlement. The program has broadened in its focus and diversified its funding, mainly through involving other foundations. Bert and David are currently looking for ways to make the youth program more self-sustaining, primarily through revenue from performances and touring, as well as media development (record sales, etc.). These strategies for revenue generation are obviously much more speculative and less steady than collecting rent. Currently, the Rhode Show performs regularly at local cultural events and is often paid to perform in schools and at community events in Providence and up and down the East Coast.

The Broad Street Studio youth program has an annual budget of $400,000, which must be raised every year. Bert describes this situation as "vulnerable", unlike the rest of the AS220 operation. He explained that involving the community in supporting programs like this might seem like an obvious thing on the surface, but it's actually quite difficult. Many well-heeled individuals would rather serve on the board of the opera or the philharmonic than come after work to a board meeting where they must face the truths about the inequalities that exist within their city. Structural inequality is not as sexy. It's more complicated. It's not as fun.

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## THE WORLD IS FLAT AT AS220

One of the most striking features of AS220 is its flat wage structure, meaning that every full-time employee receives the

same salary/benefit package. This is true for each of the more than twenty staff members, ranging from the founder to the club booker and the café manager. This principle and practice speak volumes to the organization's collective past and to its maverick approach to developing workable alternatives to the corporate model. It's easy to pick up on the pride, morale, and sense of ownership that exist within the organization.

## START WITH YOUR IDEALS, YOU'LL GROW WITH IT

"I knew we had a good idea," Bert told me about the early days of AS220. "This was something that had to grow. When you're reaching out to people to participate and take advantage of what you're offering, and you're sincere about that, you build community. In some ways, back then I didn't have the knowledge or skills or even the vocabulary to understand where we are today. It was all a learning process. Start with the ideals. You'll grow with it," said Bert proudly.

This was the response I got when I asked Bert if he could have foreseen the tremendous growth and success of his organization back when they penned their radical manifesto in the '80s. Little did his band of outsider artists know what a critical role they would play in reviving downtown Providence.

The secret sauce to the success of AS200 is a combination of willingness to roll up their sleeves and bootstrap for years on pure vision, to take deep risks based on their goals, and to grow along with the organization, while never compromising their original vision. It's also about having a good team. Bert confided that his real-estate acumen is really to be credited to Lucy Searle,, a well-known real estate journalist, who helped AS220 broker their first building acquisition on spec, and has also worked in the purchase of every other property on their roster. When I asked what her title was, Bert asked her directly, "What did we come up with? Director of ... oh, I don't know, we're not very good at that kind of thing." At AS220, professional titles aren't as relevant as getting the titles to buildings. Not a bad priority!

## CRITICAL QUESTIONS

AS220 should serve as a compelling model for cultural organizing and production for other cities around the county. The

organization has charted a course that, while unique and independent, can be studied and emulated. Ownership is at the heart of the organization's sustainability and growth. While any organization could strive for this approach, it might be more achievable for some. Compared to their friends in the Rust Belt, groups in high-rent places like Los Angeles, the San Francisco Bay Area, and New York City will struggle exponentially to get into the property ownership game.

They bought their first building when they had only one paid staff member, who was earning minimum wage, and a total organizational budget of $100,000. The building they were after was in horrific condition, having suffered decades of deferred maintenance. The paint was peeling. The roof was leaking. The floors were buckling. The main activity on the block was drugs and prostitution. The bulk of legitimate businesses in the area were pornography stores. This is the context that got the mayor to say, "Okay, you want a building, here's a building." Organizers and artists working in cities and neighborhoods with similar situations might also find civic leaders who are willing to work with them on a development campaign.

Another question that comes up is the long-term sustainability of AS220's flat (and modest) wage structure. It's clear that as long as Bert and other founding managers are involved, this system can work brilliantly. The rub may come when it is time to fill the founders' big shoes. If AS220 is able to recruit from within (which seems likely) the transition, though significant, could work very seamlessly. If the organization needs to recruit from the outside, it may be difficult to find someone with the experience, knowledge, and responsibility required to manage this multimillion-dollar operation for the same wage as the café manager or silk-screen artist. While this approach, I am sure, would not work for every organization, there is something really exciting and smart about it. Seeing the sense of ownership, pride, and collective responsibility it instilled in AS220, we have adopted a similar approach to wages at Youth Movement Records. The policy has had the same effect so far.

## HEADING HOME

At the end of our journey, Jhamel and I were exhausted and inspired. The fact that our flight out of Providence was canceled and that we had to drive to Hartford, Connecticut, and spend the night on the airport floor was softened (slightly) by the




Outside of AS220's giant building.

buzz of innovation and possibility generated by our friends at AS220. We talked into the night about what an amazing town Providence is, and how much richer it is for the anchor of authentic arts rooted at AS220. If the mayors of America's cities could see the impact that hosting the arts and artists has on their downtowns, I think that they might be willing to roll up their sleeves and grant a couple more underutilized buildings to the Umberto Crencas of the world, rare as they are.

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## THE ORIGINAL AS220 MANIFESTO!

The earliest known copy of this manifesto ran in the *Providence Eagle* on April 14, 1982. It was reprinted or referenced in many other local papers around that time.

### *The "New Challenge" Art Manifesto*

*To the editor:*

*It is time we artists stop harboring false hopes and come to terms with the present deteriorating situation in the arts. We must unite and challenge the entrenched assumptions and premises that now pervade our entire culture. We ourselves must give impetus to solving the problems that confront us today.*

*After much debate, questioning, and discussion we have put forth this manifesto and a challenge.*

*We realize that no artist can survive and grow without the support of both his peers and the public regardless of the artist's unyielding belief in himself.*

*We realize the prevailing order has the power to exercise control over the support systems necessary for artistic survival and growth including the media whose information or propaganda drastically influences public opinion and in turn public support. We challenge this order and the underlying assumptions that rationalize it!*

*We challenge the assumption that an art degree, education, position, or monetary success, necessarily legitimizes an artist's endeavors, opinions, judgments, or gives credence to an artist's work!*

*We challenge the award systems with their self-congratulatory aggrandizement that fosters the false premise that the winning of awards, prizes, grants, and so on necessarily validates an artist's work,*

*position, judgment or opinion.*

*We challenge the pervasive notion that complete, unbridled, uncensored freedom produces mediocrity and that excellence rises out of repression. It does not! Art is stifled and stagnates under repression whether that repression is overtly political or covertly economic, hence the historical exodus of artists and others from repressive states to those more conducive to the free expression of ideas. The relegating of an artist to an arbitrary position of insignificance, anonymity, or poverty by any group is a form of repression and must be challenged.*

*We challenge the discriminatory practices of the hierarchically interconnected art associations, art clubs, art galleries, art councils, art publications, art schools, and art museums. They reek of favoritism!*

*We challenge the fairness of the methods of dispersing funds for the arts and we challenge the right or privilege of any art institution, public or private, that receives state support either directly through grants or indirectly through tax write-offs, to discriminate in any way against an artist.*

*We challenge the over-emphasis on technique and process which has become a limiting and debilitating factor in art and which has also become a primary criteria for judging artistic merit.*

*Art has been removed from being an integral part of our society and has been relegated to mere processes which had led to the production of dry, academic, pedantic, superficial, mechanical, and mass produced works of art devoid of all integrity, honesty, and meaning and has stripped art of its physical, psychological, moral, and spiritual impact necessary for the thriving and indeed the very survival of human culture.*

*Art must be allowed to flourish unhampered because art is one of the last areas of culture where man defines his spiritual nature.*

*Steven Emma*
*Martha Dempster*
*Umberto Crenca*

*Chris Wiltsee is a musician, community organizer, and Bay Area native. Chris has 15 years of experience in developing innovative organizations in the nexus where music, education, and community combine. He recently accepted the post of executive director of the San Francisco Chapter of the Recording Academy (GRAMMYs), whose mission is to serve the music community through outreach, education, advocacy, and the recognition of excellence. Prior to joining the Recording Academy, Chris founded Youth Movement Records (YMR), a nonprofit youth-run recording company and youth development organization based in Oakland, California, which continues to be a leader in the youth-media field. In 2006, Chris cofounded AMP. In 2008, he cofounded the Blink Tank, a socially responsible business incubator, where he was instrumental in developing co-publishing deals for Bay Area songwriters, which has already translated into one Billboard Top 20 hit. Chris received his master's degree from the University of Michigan and an undergraduate degree from UC Santa Cruz. Chris, his wife, and their two boys currently live in the East Bay.*

# AS220'S FUNDING SITUATION *IN ONE PAGE*

**What's Worked:**

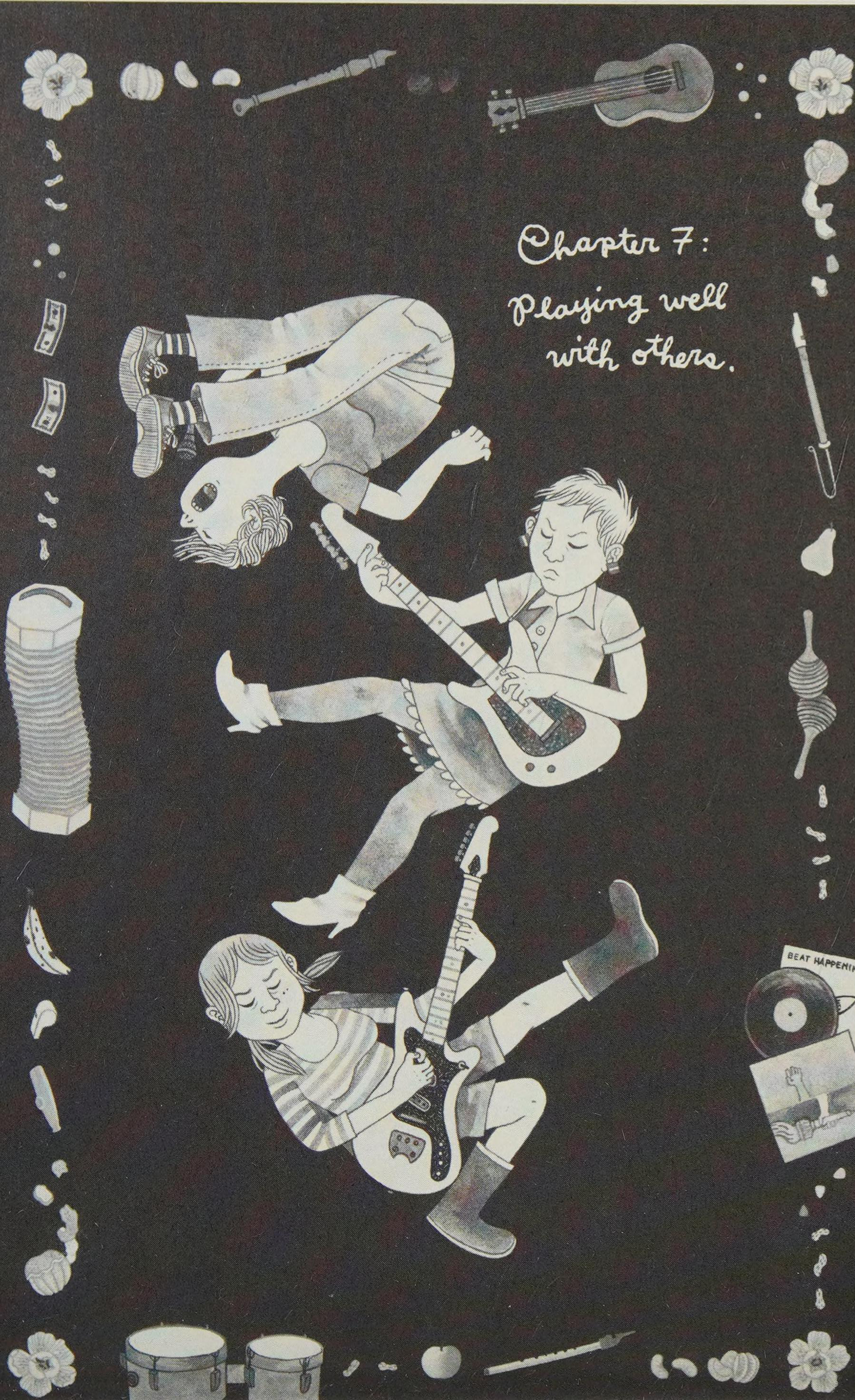
Starting out small, with clear guiding principles that have lasted • Property ownership and earned income streams (as if it were that easy!) • Staff structure that allows everyone to feel equally invested • Paying stipends to make sure that young people who need to earn money in their after-school hours can still be involved • Developing a youth program that builds bridges between recently incarcerated youth and young people who haven't been in jail or prison

**Issues:**

Finding the extra funding needed to employ as many youth as possible is a serious challenge • The flat wage structure can make it difficult to pay competitive salaries; across the board raises and cost-of-living increases can also strain the budget • Taking the youth performers on a national tour is a long-term goal that needs funding

**The Providence Factors:**

Property ownership is way more feasible in Providence than in many other metropolitan areas • There is a concentration of highbrow art schools in the area, contributing to the pool of artists, arts funders, and audience members


Chapter 7:
Playing well
with others.
BEAT HAPPENING

Artwork • Geneviève Castrée

CHAPTER SEVEN

# PLAYING WELL WITH OTHERS

## Relationships within Your Community and Local Government

*and it's political / and politics is not necessarily / just guerrilla fighters, prime ministers / and who cheated in the primaries / it's also who am i in relation to you / who are we in the way we can see ourselves / in relation to the other kids / the ones in the magazines / and the ones who miss out on stuff / that does not even matter anyways / cause they live far away from the cities / and yet they're still rebelling from the systems and the norms / that are saying be bummed and be bored / and they're taking matters in their own hands / and that's what matters*

Barr • "Half of Two Times Two"

When I got off the phone with Liz Donner from Fools Foundation in Sacramento, California, after having a conversation about issues the organization was facing, she sent me a message saying she felt like she had just gone to DIY therapy.

So, welcome to the self-help section of this book: the part about how to network and build relationships, the part written in response to all the conversations aimed at getting advice or help that have ended in a list of people I "should know," "talk to," and "work with." While this chapter also gives you a range of possible people and entities with whom to build relationships, its main aim is to give you guidelines and tools to use in assessing whether the relationship makes sense for you and, if it does, how to go about building it.

The idea of having a chapter on relationships also stems from trying to understand how some organizations manage to accumulate

momentum, capacity, name recognition, resources, and credibility in different communities in a way that doesn't necessarily correlate with budget size.

Running the risk of sounding like an author trying to give new labels to old ideas, I chalk this phenomenon up to organizations knowing how to be *players*. I'm not recommending you become a smarmy-person-who-hits-on-everyone kind of player — instead, more like someone who plays a game and adopts a way of thinking about goals, wins, losses, targets, and strategy.

To make it in a field as obscure, financially challenging, and prone to outsider mentality as punk, hip-hop, and underground music organizations, it's important to study this aspect of successful groups. At every step, we have to think about who's on our team, and who should be.

Having a strong relationship network can serve you in a number of ways. First, it gives you the opportunity to learn from other organizations' successes and challenges. It makes it possible for you to solve problems collaboratively and build coalitions to topple obstacles, like, say, restrictive all-ages legislation. If you reach out to funders, public officials, and prominent businesses, these relationships cannot only sustain you financially, but also add a layer of protection against discrimination for the organization and some of the young people involved.

## SUPPORT NETWORKS

In 2006, as part of the process of trying to understand more about what is and isn't working in sustaining youth music organizations, I asked organizations who their supporters were. A landscape of support began to emerge, with some obvious and not-so-obvious information:

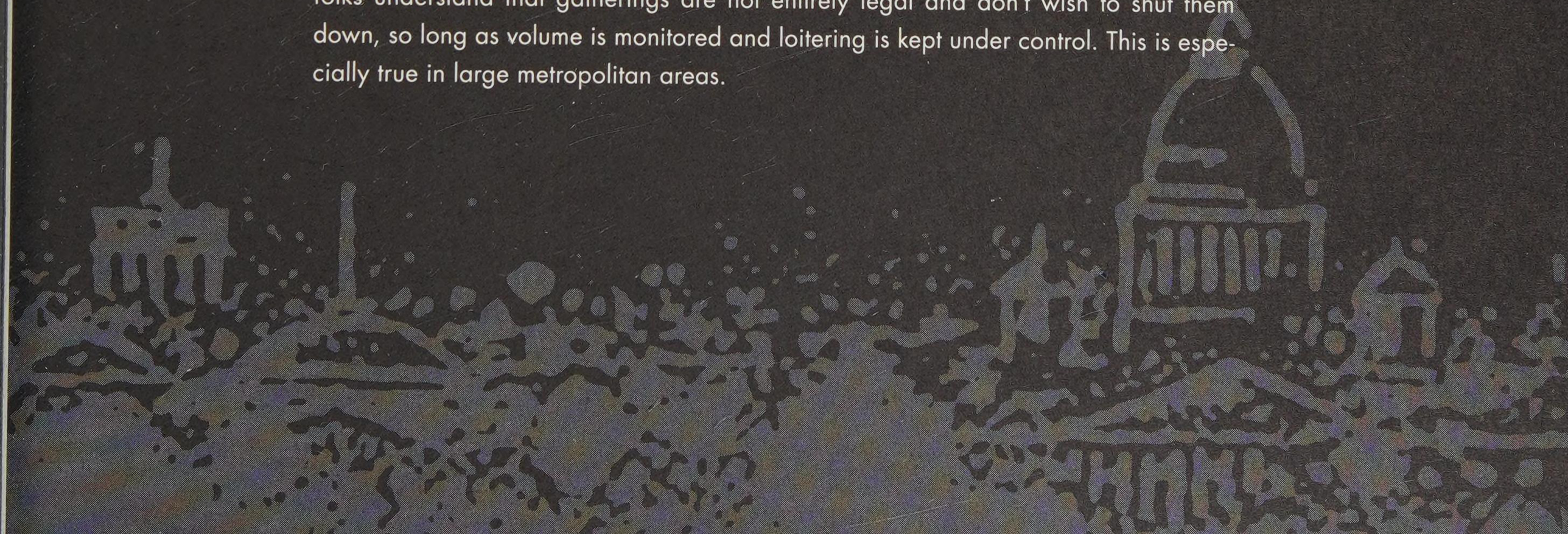
*Obvious:* Bands (both local and nationally known) and people who go to shows ranked at the top, and this is clearly because they are the most directly connected.

*Not Obvious:* Parents were also high on the support ranking, even though a lot of these spaces are semi-underground. Many of the spaces are a little rough around the edges, but parents nonetheless appreciate having a place for their kids to plug in.

*Obvious:* Police and fire departments were second to last, behind national corporations, in supporting these

# LEGALITY

Because some of this discussion looks directly at how to build relationships with local government, it is clearly not appropriate for organizations that are not entirely legal. There are instances, however, where it's possible and sensible for an underground venue to be on the up-and-up with neighbors and possibly even cops. Often these folks understand that gatherings are not entirely legal and don't wish to shut them down, so long as volume is monitored and loitering is kept under control. This is especially true in large metropolitan areas.



organizations — which makes sense, because these are usually the people shutting down events involving youth gathering to listen to music.

*Not Obvious:* Local and regional businesses, including music-industry-related businesses (record labels, booking agents, other clubs), were largely absent.

I also noticed that many successful youth music organizations had multiple types of groups supporting them; i.e., they had diversified support. Organizations that felt rather isolated or were just scraping by tended to have support from just one or two groups. This has two implications. First, it shows that putting energy into building relationships with people outside of our immediate networks helps sustain organizations. Second, it illustrates that there simply are not the same kinds of resources in every place (like a music industry) or the desire to tap into certain kinds of support (like corporate support). In every town, however, there is an array of people to collaborate with, a local government, and an economy that youth music organizations must interact with.

## MUSIC VENUES ARE FROM VENUS AND POLICE ARE FROM MARS

Typically, music venues and organizations that are connecting young people to punk, hip-hop, or rock have had somewhat adversarial relationships with their surroundings. Many of the issues covered elsewhere in the book contribute to this, such as negative stereotypes about young people, misunderstandings about popular music, and the formidable problem of too much noise too near the places where people are living.

It's easy to feel an "us vs. them" mentality as you start the process of connecting with neighbors, cops, elected officials, funders, and other nonprofits who are skeptical of your organization. Every neighbor, business, or local group you talk to is going to have a different organizational culture, different goals, and a different philosophy about how to achieve them. They may not understand how a new organization fits into the picture, or, even worse, they may see the new effort as at odds or in competition with their goals or activities. At the end of the day, however, all of the entities you want to build relationships with locally are just made up of people. People who live in the

same place that you live. People who want that place to be great. People who care about youth. People who want there to be jobs and educational opportunities. People who like music and want to feel safe in their neighborhood.

With this in mind, you can push back on the unnecessary "with us or against us" thinking within yourself and your peers so that you can challenge it within the parents, teachers, cops, mayors, venues, bands, and other local businesses that stand to cut short the livelihood of your organization. Of course, sometimes this thinking is necessary and you have to prepare yourself for a fight, but more on that later.

In general, the steps to thinking about organizational relationship-building are these:

- Identify the people you want/need to support your organization.
- Do some research on their history, connections, and goals, so you can figure out what interests you have in common with them.
- Know exactly what it is you want from them or want to convey to them.
- Approach them before there is a problem (if possible).
- Figure out ways to mutually support one another.
- Follow through.
- Stay in communication.
- Say thank you at every opportunity.

Some things come into play that might require different timing, timelines, and directness in communication. Getting another organization to partner on an event and help with outreach and production is pretty straightforward. You can set up a meeting and ask them. If it's something less direct, like you want a record label or venue as an ally in the community, then the approach can be sort of slow and organic. To start, set up an information-sharing meeting with them over coffee and personally invite them to some events.

In identifying the relationships you want to build, you can start with the ones that are already in progress — with bands, the local record store, other venues and promoters, radio DJs. Then you can move on to the ones that you want to have, like with record labels, recording and production studios, larger arts nonprofits, high schools, booking agents, local foundations, and city officials.

When there's an audience you need to reach that is further

away, you have to work at it. Tempted to rip off some tips from relationship self-help books, I went back through my list of interviewees and pulled out some good communication and relationship-building advice from a wide range of sources. There's no guarantee this will help get you dates, but it should at least make you some friends.

*Don't Stereotype.* When I asked Seattle City Council member Richard Conlin how elected officials and young people could best approach working together, he stated that the first and most important thing was that both parties need to avoid stereotyping one another. His job is to help a young person who comes into his office, the same way he would help anyone else. Your job as an organizer is to not apply politician stereotypes that prevent you from being able to have an honest conversation about issues.

*Be Inclusive.* Because music organizations end up in a position of having to say no a lot — to bands or partnerships that don't fit with the organization's vision — it's really important to figure out a way to combat an image of elitism. When saying no to bands or promoters, be clear about your reasons, and pass on a list of venues and promotion outlets they can use themselves. Hosting regular open meetings or volunteer orientations is one way your organization can practice being open to the community at large.

*Be Collaborative.* Similar to being inclusive, being collaborative helps build a network of organizations that are invested in your organization. Saying yes to good invitations to collaborate, even if there's not an immediate benefit, is one way to build relationships with people and organizations. For instance, if another youth organization could use your help setting up a PA or running a show and you have a long-term goal of being able to reach different youth communities, this is one way you can take a step toward that goal.

*Be Direct.* Ask for what you want and also ask other people what they want or need in setting up partnerships and building relationships. Only say yes to what you know you can deliver on.

*Follow Through.* Make sure your organization follows through on its responsibilities. If you can't, be up-front about it. Fallout from not following through is generally what makes collaboration and relationships go awry.

*Trust Your Gut.* Sometimes you may not know exactly why you want to say no (or yes) to a collaboration. Develop

# SHY GUYS

Chances are, you've found yourself in a position of wanting to organize, promote, and educate because you see yourself as a behind-the-scenes kind of person. If reading about having to do outreach to cops, elected officials, and funders freaks you out, you're not alone. High-level schmoozing takes a certain breed, or at the very least, some years of getting used to it. I'm one of those types who would rather talk to the person bussing tables about their work history during the entirety of a social mixer than work a crowd. I sat in many meetings with my Vera Project co-conspirators, incredulous as they would ask a city official or company representative about getting tens of thousands of dollars, and then hand it over to me to talk about programs. I learned a lot from being linked up with these charismatic, socially fearless individuals. Without their confidence and risk-taking, the organization simply would not be where it is today. In this way, it's extremely useful to work with lots of different people and put the outgoing ones to work on outreach. Building your network can start with picking different kinds of folks to be your closest people. I also learned that qualities I brought to the table were critical to keeping us balanced and able to build deeper relationships and different kinds of connections. Strong mentorship and experience can help everyone build skills for working with people we might perceive to be beyond our reach. At the end of the day, though, we need all kinds of community leaders — quiet, loud, young, old, careful, and daring.

your instincts and learn to trust them.

## GO LOCAL

This section lays out the web of local relationships that can create a safety net around your organization.

### In the Neighborhood

You may already know the people in the neighborhood around the space you are using, but if you don't, you should. This is especially true if you'll be having loud shows that are attracting a lot of people. When it comes to other business owners and residents, you have no choice but to coexist in nonintrusive ways. You can start by going door-to-door and introducing yourself and your organization to your neighbors, both residents and businesses. If you have any promotional flyers or handouts, be sure to bring them along. For programs not focused on putting on public events, door-knocking about your program may not be key to survival, but is still a good neighborly gesture that might bring about other benefits.

Ways to be connected to your local-business neighbors:

- Throw a joint neighborhood event.
- Copromote one another's products.
- Trade passes to a show for in-kind donations (such as pastries from a local coffee shop or a gift certificate from a store that you could raffle off at fundraiser).

### In Your Sectors (Music, Art, Nonprofit)

Creating alliances with other cultural businesses and nonprofits is a bit easier in terms of finding common interests, but it can also be challenging when it comes to finding time in everyone's busy schedule or finding concrete things to work on together.

*Music.* To the extent that your community has a music industry of some kind, try to get your name in the mix:

- This might be obvious, but start by being really good to the musicians who work with you, and reach out to the ones who might be too big for your organization so that at least you are on their radar (e.g., invite them to be a guest at a special show).
- Provide guest-list spots to people who work at other venues, labels, radio stations, record stores, and other music companies.
- Try to be collaborative and communicate openly about

booking in order to avoid competing events as much as possible.
- Seek out sponsorship and collaboration opportunities (e.g., having a radio show air live from your space, providing artists to perform at other events).
- If part of your deal is training young people in music-related positions, you have the opportunity to connect local businesses to already-trained interns and employees.

As we will talk about later in more detail, having these strong connections to the rest of the music sector can be really important in terms of organizing to protect your interests as music businesses. It can also be important for keeping one another in check. There are a lot of problems in the music world with bad behavior being written off as acceptable for rock stars, emcees, and people in the industry surrounding them. If, for example, a club in your scene is operating in such a way that it's obviously putting people at risk and being really out in the open about it, those mistakes could affect you and every other live music business. An organized music community can push that club to straighten up before the authorities get involved. In a different kind of example, when white-power music was on the upswing in Seattle, a small group of clubs formed a coalition that then went around to other clubs and talked to them about the trend and how to steer clear of it.

*Arts and Youth Nonprofits.* Issues come up all the time that affect nonprofits whose work overlaps with yours. This is when your partnerships and ability to solve problems collaboratively is key. Regionally, there are often networks that you can plug into, which can be especially useful if you operate outside a major metropolitan area. Youth organizations with music and arts programs in the Northwest have started a regional network called TART (which stands for Teen Arts Resource Team) in order to share strategies, ideas, and resources. Members include nonprofits, teen centers, and underground music organizations. Additionally, partnering with organizations that are related but serve a slightly different purpose and crowd is fundamental to expanding your reach.

Some activities to consider:

- Team up with other art spaces on an "art walk" (a night where there are several art openings at once) and bring a much-needed representation of youth, underground, or conceptual art to an otherwise highbrow or conventional

arts event.

- If you train young artists, team up with a venue to host an event; if you have a space, team up with a group of young artists.
- Give passes to the homeless youth center so that folks without economic resources can come to shows.
- Make partnerships with larger organizations that can bring your organization's name to a broader audience and a new pool of funders.

*With Local Media*. In comparison to less feel-good social issues, music and art are very media-friendly topics. This is especially true when you add in the social issues your organization is addressing (youth access to music opportunities, raising awareness about causes, and supporting emerging artists). Within a few months of doing good work, you can expect a local paper to run an article with the headline "The Kids Are Alright," "Smells Like Teen Spirit," or "Sonic Youth."

To build a productive relationship with the media:

- Do your job as a promoter and always submit event information well in advance to calendars in local papers and on radio stations.
- Do press releases for important occasions such as benefit shows, collaborations, and membership appreciation events.
- Meet with marketing departments to talk about potential sponsorship opportunities.
- Encourage the creation of an all-ages section in the paper or an on-air all-ages calendar at a radio station. This can help media outlets differentiate themselves in a way that's good for their business.
- Try to be egalitarian in your media relationships if possible, so you don't come under fire simply because you're viewed as hooked up to one paper exclusively.
- Always allow reporters into shows (if you are operating legally). If you're operating illegally, press coverage — even positive, supportive coverage — could result in your space getting shut down.
- Try to buy ad space when you can afford it, and ask for donated ad space when you have a benefit.

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## BUREAUCRACY 101: LOCAL GOVERNMENT RELATIONSHIPS

At some music organizations, the idea of working with the

government doesn't ever come up or, if it does, it stirs up feelings of animosity or insecurity because of historically challenging relationships. Recently, however, government agencies have been becoming more open to the idea of supporting and encouraging local music rather than simply regulating it. Outside the U.S., this is even more common. In Brazil, for example, the minister of culture, Gilberto Gil, said of grassroots hip-hop organizations, "These phenomena cannot be regarded negatively, because [of] huge contingents of the population for whom they are the only connection to the larger world. A government who cannot perceive this won't have the capacity to formulate policies that are sufficiently inclusive to keep young people from being diverted to criminality or consigned to social isolation."[22] Yes, Brazil is cool.

The biggest question in building relationships with local government is how you approach the conversation. Your level of familiarity with the inner workings of local government, your level of community support and name recognition, what your needs or demands are, and timing all play into whether you go in humbly seeking advice or whether you take a more demanding stance.

22 • Larry Richter, "Brazilian Government Invests in Culture of Hip Hop," *New York Times*, March 14, 2007.

**Elected Officials**

The two main reasons why cities create policies that quash all-ages music activity are:

1. They don't know our organizations exist, or if they do, they have misconceptions about them.
2. We let them.

Because legislation that can threaten the existence of music venues is written regularly, elected folks need to know who you are, what you're up to, how you benefit the city, and what hurts and helps you. This means that at least part of our music communities have to commit to being in the room when the powers that be are talking about and legislating our scenes. Yes, it can be incredibly boring — but, as Gilman volunteer Jesse Townely says, "No one understands how much power there is in staying awake during zoning meetings."

Some things you might find yourself wanting to talk with your mayor and city council members about are:

- Regulation of all-ages shows and dances
- Nightclub restrictions

- Noise ordinances
- Poster regulations
- Curfews
- Transportation schedules in your area
- Getting funding for your program
- Getting a statement of support for your program at special events or fundraisers

**Police and Fire Departments**

For public-safety reasons, the police and fire departments will be keeping an eye on you whether you're aware of it or not. In our first year at Vera, we invited the main dude at our precinct to come down to one of the shows we were throwing, at which point he told us that undercover cops had already been to several of our shows. At a show in a community bike shop in San Francisco, undercover cops came and threatened to arrest a promoter who didn't have a permit. If you're operating legally, be ahead of the game and try to get them to come to a show that you know is going to be mellow. Ask for their business cards and aim to be on a first-name business with the beat cops and fire chief. Going back to that earlier piece about personality types, try to identify the best person for communicating with the police. James and Kate at Vera were both brilliant with talking to cops, while I was too easily agitated.

**Schools**

Building relationships with schools in order to get your name on the radar of teenagers can be hard unless you have an in. Teachers have to cram in curriculum and give tests, and they usually don't have any extra time for guests. Whenever staff at Vera met teachers, no matter what subject they were teaching, we still tried to get in front of their classes. It was very random. I talked to students in an overcrowded ecology class who were learning about composting from a friend of mine; to my sister's homeroom class in a suburban alternative high school, where all the white kids were emulating urban gangsters; and to affluent private-school kids whose teachers wanted to get them plugged into service-learning opportunities.

There were always mixed results. Sometimes it seemed like it was better not to come at young people from a traditional we're adults-telling-you-what-to-do-in-an-institution-that-is-always-telling-you-what-to-do kind of scenario. On the other hand, there was always at least one student from each experience who showed up to our next orientation, which made it all worth it.

# LEARNING TO LOBBY

Another word for building a relationship with an elected official is "lobbying." For-profit and nonprofit organizations are allowed to lobby officials and take stances on issues. Nonprofit organizations are restricted from endorsing candidates and spending more than a certain percentage of their budgets on lobbying. For-profits have more flexibility but are still restricted.

In regard to getting support for your organization through policy changes or funding, there are a few things to keep in mind when approaching elected officials:

**Go in a Group.** Try to bring two or three people who represent different perspectives (a musician, a parent, a local business owner) and identify yourself in multiple ways (a college student, a lifelong resident, a resident of the official's district, if applicable).

**Get Their Advice.** Ask them how best to use the city government to help with the issue and who else you should talk to (i.e., get a sense of who will also be sympathetic to your needs and who will need more coaxing).

**Know How to Time It.** There are busy times, slow times, and hot-button issue times in local government. You can use any of these times to your advantage by knowing what's going on when. Don't worry if you don't get it right the first time; the more you're in communication with city officials, the more you'll learn. Timing is especially important when it comes to policy adoption and budget cycles. If you're hoping to get funding for the next fiscal year, for example, you need to be meeting with officials at least six months in advance and asking them where there might be money to support your program.

**Make Your Organization's Name and/or Your Cause Unavoidable.** Once they know who you are, you want to make sure your name gets reinforced. This could be through letter writing, mass emails, editorials, and the like. Since you're a creative entity, get creative with it. Every time someone in another city asked the Vera Project to give them information on how to get going, cofounder James Keblas asked that person to first write a letter to the mayor of Seattle that thanked him for supporting a program that served as a model to other cities. Folks organizing against the Teen Dance Ordinance took the direct action approach, staging music and dance at public meetings and then inviting the press.

We also collaborated with student-run clubs and with parents and teachers to host end-of-year performances and parties.

**Other City Departments**

Having relationships with the folks who manage parks, community centers, and libraries, or who work in the arts and cultural department, the music and entertainment office (if there is one), and the department of human services is always beneficial. Sometimes you might be eligible to get funding from them for providing youth programming that they don't provide themselves, and other times you can use their facilities or get involved in other stuff they are doing.

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## MUSIC COMMUNITY ORGANIZING

As I was writing this section, I got an email from all-ages organizer Kate Becker explaining to me that a venue in Olympia, Washington, was coming under fire from the city. Manium was a collective space, incorporated as an LLC (a type of for-profit corporation), that has legally been putting on all-ages shows for a couple years. They had a hard time with local officials from the start, making it difficult to get traction as a legit space. The collective members responded to requests from different city departments to perform repairs and get permits, while dealing with inconsistent treatment and indefinite temporary closures.

It was frustrating for Manium — and the dozens of organizations who share the same story. It was also hard for an outsider like myself, with a record collection that is at least 25 percent dedicated to Olympia artists, to understand how there could be any anti-music vibes in a town where you can't throw a rock without hitting a musician.

How could the situation be so strikingly different sixty miles north in Seattle, where the city's international recognition is largely due to artists that originate from the southern point of the Puget Sound?

A graduate student at Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government studied the relationship between government and music in Seattle and offered advice on building healthier relationships in three stages:[23]

- *Stage 1.* The music community must generate government

23 • James Mackison, "The Relationship Between Government and Music in Seattle: Lessons for Other Local Governments," Unpublished master's thesis, John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, 2006.

support by identifying common issues, forming associations, mobilizing and organizing support for their cause, and identifying the elected officials who are sympathetic.

- *Stage 2.* City government must pursue policies that support local music by allocating staff resources to understanding music issues, determining the economic impact of music-related policies, creating incentives to keep musicians and music-related business in the city, and creating and supporting programs that get youth involved in music.
- *Stage 3.* Government and the music community need to address issues that threaten the sustainability of local music by taking into consideration economic barriers that affect musicians, coordinating regulation between agencies, and — this is crucial — not discriminating against genres. Mackison points out that hip-hop culture in Seattle comes under unfair scrutiny and is not lauded the same way Seattle's independent rock sector is. "It is worth debating whether or not unequal treatment in clamping down on hip-hop clubs resulted in punishing all hip-hop music for the actions of a few, as was the case with youth involvement in music and the Teen Dance Ordinance."

So, back to Olympia, where an organized and civically active music scene could come in handy for Manium. Because Kate was a key player in Seattle during all of the stages described above, and has started two all-ages venues herself, she offered these jewels of wisdom to the Manium members on how to work with the city, delineating both a "with us" or "against us" strategy.

**With Us:**

- Try to make friends with city officials by inviting them into the space to see it in action (a theme throughout this chapter).
- Get local rock stars involved.
- Have young people and parents show up en masse to public meetings and testify about how important the space is to them.

**Against Us:**

- Get an attorney to write a letter that calls for the city to cease and desist harassment of the space.
- Get leaders who are willing to be arrested and force the issue into court.
- Get the media involved to expose any unfair play and put



...at AS220. Photo: Scott Lapham

public pressure on officials.

And, no matter what, *document everything*! Keep copies of all letters to or from the city, print out copies of emails, and have members write down their versions of any phone conversations that they have.

Ultimately, Manium ended up in an eternal waiting game with the city. After the 2003 Great White fire at the Rhode Island club the Station, local officials everywhere went on a mission to strictly regulate clubs. The Great White band members didn't tell the club they were going to use pyrotechnics, and when they did, foam insulation stage curtains caught on fire and burned down the wooden structure of the club. Tragically, 100 people died. Comparing the concrete box of Manium to the Station was enough to stir up dozens of scared people commenting on local news websites in support of shutting the place down.

The *Weekly Volcano* covered the story and suggested that, though there are two sides to the story, the city seemed to be unfairly reacting to Manium's somewhat confrontational and determined stance. Manium member Chris Bueg openly questioned the city's motivation in closing Manium stating, "I think [the city] is looking for a revitalization of downtown, and they'd rather not have the Manium where it is. I don't think what we're doing fits in with their long-term plan. It's totally within their power to create a real alternative here."[24] The city could work with them to create a safe all-ages space instead of shutting them down entirely.

Instead, another noncommercial music space ended up on the chopping block. More sad articles ran on the state of all-ages music and a handful of people sleep better at night knowing that Manium is closed, while people in other establishments are under the same "threat" as they enjoy their sprinkler-free drinking and dining.

This situation highlights how different restrictions and scrutiny can be in various places. In San Francisco, people get pissed when they can't have a show in a squat, in the middle of the street, or wherever they damn please. In non-metropolitan and more conservative places, it sometimes seems that no amount of playing by the rules will work. The truth is, relationships can be painful, decisions can be unjust, and sometimes things just don't work out. All-ages music spots created by well-intentioned people close down all the time.

At the same time, every effort helps, even if it doesn't last.

24 • Bill Timmick, "All-Ages Woes: The Fight to Keep Olympia's All-Ages Club Manium Alive," *Weekly Volcano*, September 27, 2007.

Though Manium is gone, its struggles stirred up enough dialogue and awareness about the local climate for all-ages music, that the next wave of Olympia all-ages organizers are better positioned to make it through the obstacles, building on Manium's successes and learning from its failures.

## PLAYING WELL WITH OTHERS SPOTLIGHTS

The two organizations profiled in the remainder of this chapter offer up different and more hopeful aspects of relationship building at the local level. Batey Urbano in Chicago is a vital presence within the Humboldt Park neighborhood, able to offer vast programs with very little space or staff because of its strong neighborhood connections. The Vera Project in Seattle has crafted a unique and mutually beneficial relationship with city government after watching venues shut down in the city for years. These two players illustrate how relationships can be your most important assets.




Outside of Batey Urbano. Photo by Shannon Stewart.

# BATEY URBANO

## VITALS

**Located:** Chicago, Illinois • **Founded:** 2002 • **Organization Type:** Nonprofit, mostly volunteer-run collective • **Music Genre of Focus:** Hip-hop, bomba, salsa, merengue, plena, bachata, rock, alternative, reggaeton • **Goings On:** Nights of Expression, including poetry, music performances, battles, and theater; tutoring and an after-school computer lab; a web radio station; creative writing and journalism classes; and civic engagement projects • **Fees:** Tutoring and other services are mostly free. Youth interns are paid to participate in programs. Shows and plays can be as much as $25 in order to raise money for programs, but they're usually much less. • **Where the Money Comes From:** The Puerto Rican Cultural Center (PRCC) and some small foundation grants, and community donations of $5 to $10. • **Founding Story:** Because there was both an abundance of youth in the PRCC community and serious issues facing young people in the Humboldt Park neighborhood, a collective of college students came together to start a positive and inclusive space. • **Claims to Fame:** Batey Urbano has a unique way of integrating politics and cultural expression with the cultivation of youth leadership and civic engagement. The success of Batey Urbano has led to the establishment of other cultural Bateys in Chicago and across the country. • **The Local Scene:** Batey Urbano is located in the Humboldt Park area in the northwest region of Chicago; it's home to a large population of Puerto Ricans, African-Americans, and Mexicans. The stretch of Division Street where the center is located is the last historic Puerto Rican neighborhood in Chicago.

SPOTLIGHT:

# BATEY URBANO

**Chicago, IL**

*By Diaris Alexander*

Stepping past the first huge fifty-six-foot Puerto Rican flag on my way to visit Batey Urbano, I was immersed into what seemed like a different world. The term "batey" is derived from Puerto Rican history and refers to the space where all family and local cultural functions occur. I suddenly felt part of a living, breathing museum whose primary exhibit documented the effects of a modern-day Puerto Rican/Latino community in America facing the threat of gentrification.

I strolled past beautiful paintings on plant containers and public objects, tastefully placed by students from local alternative high schools. I also saw creative political statements expressed in magnificent visual art on the sides of businesses.

As I walked down Division Street in Humboldt Park, the home of Batey Urbano and an area locals call Paseo Boricua, I witnessed diverse groups of people out enjoying the nice June weather. Multiple age groups with different hair textures, clothing styles, musical preferences, and interests filled the sidewalks and storefronts on Paseo Boricua.

Like its umbrella organization, the Puerto Rican Cultural Center (PRCC), Batey Urbano was created based on the ideology that self-determination and self-sufficiency in the Puerto Rican/Latino community leads to positive development. The PRCC's motto is to "live and help to live."

Like many inner-city neighborhoods across the nation, Paseo Boricua has high rates of gang violence, drug addiction, alcohol abuse, teen pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases, poverty, and

high school dropouts. After a devastating weekend of violence in July of 2002, when twenty-five shootings resulted in five deaths, one of Batey's founders, Michael Reyes, realized that "there was no organization to address gang violence and the drug trade in this community from the perspective of young people." Because most of the collective members lived in the neighborhood, they agreed that Batey needed to create an inclusive space where both the victims and perpetrators of the notorious weekend's violence were welcome to partake in activities and discussions that served as engaging and relevant alternatives ways to spend their time and build community.

Today, collective members of Batey bring resources to the community in an effort to promote youth civic engagement and to strengthen self-esteem. Many of these resources come through the medium of expression that young people in the neighborhood relate to most, hip-hop, but also through bomba, plena, salsa and other various Latin and Caribbean genres.

From the outside, Batey looks like it could be a youth program in the Beverly Hills of any region. I was in awe to see two iMac computers in a lit storefront display, brightly emblazoned "Batey Urbano" in bright gold lettering on a red background. I thought about the bold statement of trust it made to the neighborhood visually, and the message it conveyed to common passersby such as myself. It amazed me that when it grew dark later that evening, the Macs still shone brightly in the display.

Behind the storefront, Batey's one big room was sectioned off for its many programs. Computers lined a wall for students to use after school, and, in the corner, backdrops for sets of a play were arranged. Adjacent to the performance space was the kitchen/café area. In the back was a hallway leading to the restrooms and an area being used as a dressing room for the theater project; Batey folks were talking about turning it into a darkroom.

Back in the main room we were introduced to Tato "Jesus" Laviera, an acclaimed Latino playwright from New York, best-known as one of the first writers in the United States to use Spanglish in mainstream literature and poetry. At the time of our visit, Laviera was working with youth in the Batey theater project.

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## A COMMON STRUGGLE

On the day of our visit, Janeida, the collective member acting as our guide, invited us to take a tour of La Casita Don Pedro,

an art installation put on by members of Batey and youth from local high schools. The exhibit showed visitors both sides of development, starting with a bubbly real estate agent and shifting over to a young person illustrating the impact of displacement. The show was created to illustrate the effects of gentrification in Humboldt Park and was a community event that brought people of all ages and walks of life, from infants to people over 70.

But this isn't just about one neighborhood in Chicago. Michael said that the primary goal of Batey Urbano is to combat the forces devastating the community, and to create a future for a people who have been isolated and left to fend for themselves in this country. He talked about wanting to be a model for other communities, as these issues are not unique to Humboldt Park, but exist in other neighborhoods across the nation and the island of Puerto Rico. Accordingly, Batey Urbano encourages the start-up of other Bateys, including the recent Batey Orlando project in Florida.

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## THE COMMUNITY SUPPORT

This story of Batey begins with the PRCC, a Humboldt community stronghold and the parent organization of Batey Urbano. The PRCC is directed by Jose E. Lopez, a public intellectual and visionary leader who uses his university connections to bring attention to the struggles of Humboldt Park. "Intellectual production doesn't exist in the academy; rather, the academies use community to study ... [Communities] are places where we actually make history, where we make sociology, psychology, and all of the other things we study," he stated at the introduction of a conference the PRCC was hosting for the University of Illinois.[25]

The center has also sponsored the creation of a family service center and an alternative high school. Though Batey is for youth and led by young people, Michael is quick to point out that the program would not be possible without the support of the PRCC and the mentorship that relationship provides.

After taking the tour and making a few stops along Paseo Boricua, we ended up at Nellie's, one of a handful of local restaurants that feed the Batey youth locally produced, healthy after-school snacks. The food helps them remain focused and accomplish their daily goals at Batey. This also builds a relationship between the youth and local businesses and helps prevent the

25 • Community as Intellectual Space is a weekend-long conference organized annually by the University of Illinois's continuing education program.

development of chain restaurants and businesses. The food at Nellie's was served buffet-style and tasted like a real, home-cooked meal, similar to the West Indian dishes my parents cooked for me growing up.

## HOW BATEY SUPPORTS THE COMMUNITY

Though Batey is run almost entirely by volunteers with almost no budget, they provide many integrated programs. Barrio Arts, Culture and Communication Academy (BACCA) is essentially an after-school program hosted by Batey that creates a space for youth to get homework help and computer access. BACCA consists of three individual programs — La Voz: Journalism and Newspaper Layout Design Academy; Radio Batey: Online Radio Broadcasting Academy; and Batey Theater: Production and Performance Academy.

Juventud del Ambiente Boricua is a group whose primary purpose is to provide a safe place for young lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender individuals to discuss their sexuality and combat negative or ignorant perspectives in the community.

Batey Tech takes place four days a week; its mission is to assist the academic development of youth, using technology and fostering critical thinking skills. In addition to tutoring, this program also provides college-preparation workshops and encourages students to assume leadership roles.

Batey also serves as a venue for various community performances. Poetry with a Purpose is a regular event that provides an audience for writers and spoken-word artists of all levels. Collective members, the majority of whom are poets, believe that creative expression is a valuable form of resistance, and that their role is to tie everything to history and promote personal development and civic engagement.

Batey also hosts a weekly Four Elements of Hip Hop Expression event. Each night begins with an open mic and closes with a cipher. Events may include breaking, emcee battles, DJ exhibitions and battles, and other performances.

## PUTTING NEIGHBOR BACK IN THE NEIGHBORHOOD

The Participatory Democracy Project is a joint endeavor of

Mural outside of Batey Urbano. Photo by Shannon Stewart.

Batey Urbano and the PRCC, the 26th Ward Organization, and the Puerto Rican Agenda. The groups collaborate to ensure the social, economic, and political development of Humboldt Park residents as they unite to fight gentrification.

As part of the Participatory Democracy Project, Batey teaches young people about being of service to those around them. Aside from talking about politics, the participants conducted neighborhood surveys in which they asked residents about their quality of life in Humboldt Park. Young people found out what the residents needed — for example, new garbage cans or new lightbulbs for streetlights — and then made sure their community got what they needed. Many of the neighbors they help struggle with language or other cultural barriers.

## LOCAL SOLIDARITY

The highlight of my visit, was the festival that took place in Humboldt Park. It was reminiscent of Carnival weekend in the San Francisco Bay Area, where I was raised. Large groups of young people filled the park for the festivities through the night: rides, games, food and craft vendors, and dance and emcee battles.

The week of the festivities led up to the People's Day Parade — a homegrown parade down Paseo Boricua that the whole community is welcome to take part in — held in addition to the "main" parade celebrating Puerto Rican culture that has become highly commercialized, held in downtown Chicago and featuring such figures as Daddy Yankee and *America's Next Top Model* winner Jaslene Gonzalez. Batey's collective members hosted seven events throughout the course of the weekend.

At one point during the festival, our guide from Batey, Janeida, was asked to perform a spoken-word piece. She was surprised and unprepared, but gladly obliged. Community members cheered her on as she began, and enthusiastically chimed in on passionate, climactic phrases within the poem:

"Is it because I don't look like a banana threw up on my head? Is it because I don't frequent the neighborhood hookah bars? How about you take the fact that I won't let you turn Humboldt into a dog park or Roberto Clementes into a Windsor Pilates studio that offers spinning classes, yoga, and step aerobics." Here the crowd joined in. "Now stuff that in your hookah pipe and smoke it."

Hearing the piece for the first time, I was in awe to see so many members respond to Janeida's piece as if it were their own. A sense of pride filled the air for the resident poet, and the powerful role art plays in bringing a community together was made clear.

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*Diaris Alexander first got started in the all-ages movement while a junior at Skyline HS in Oakland, CA. She became actively involved in the youth-run record label & development organization Youth Movement Records (YMR) as a founding participant and one of two youth board members. While part of YMR, Diaris became increasingly interested in the intersection of the arts, education, technology, youth, the community, and social change at large. The passion Diaris found in her work with YMR inspired her to write her college and scholarship personal statements on her experience, earning her a full-ride to the university of her choice as a Jackie Robinson and Gates Millennium Scholar. While an undergraduate at UCLA, Diaris conducted research for AMP before joining the advisory committee. She was also a key figure in the campus's cultural programming as the director of its chapter of Hip Hop Congress for two years and a member of the executive team of the Jazz Reggae Fest for three years. Diaris earned her B.A. from UCLA in psychology with a minor in theater in June 2009. She now resides in Oakland and is working with YMR in a program director capacity.*

# BATEY URBANO NEIGHBORLY STRATEGY *IN ONE PAGE*

**What's Worked:**

Members of Batey actively build relationships with individuals and organizations, asking what they can do for the people who surround them. • Batey has a huge amount of trust in their community, demonstrated by opening a space after violence broke out, leaving their door open, and not trying to hide their gear. • Partnerships with local organizations and businesses enrich the training opportunities they provide young people. • Commitment to collective leadership gets transferred to young people through trainings in art, leadership development, and other skills.

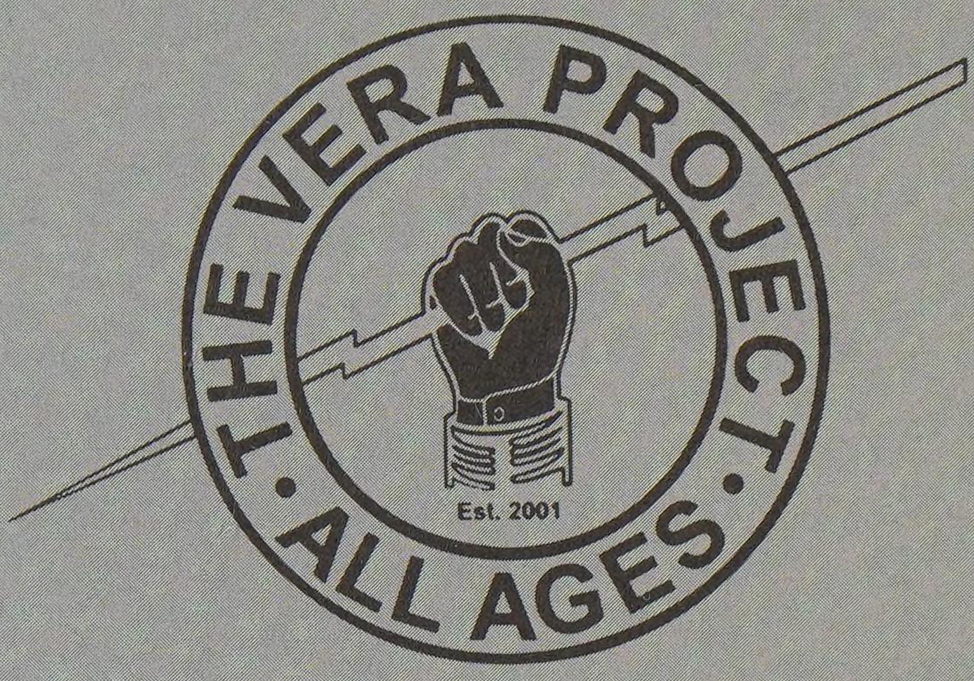
**Issues That Come Up:**

Because those involved are almost all volunteers, Batey is always operating beyond capacity. Most leaders are students and working artists trying to wear half a dozen hats. • Batey gets very little funding outside of what it gets from the PRCC.

**The Chicago / Humboldt Park Factor:**

Beyond hip hop, theater, radio and writing, Batey's ability to build strong relationships is based on a shared beliefs about liberation of Puerto Ricans, both on the island itself and for the islands of Puerto Ricans living in the continental United States • The neighborhood is being gentrified and changing rapidly, thus changing the network of relationships they have built to sustain themselves.


ALL AGES




# VITALS

**Located:** Seattle, Washington • **Founded:** 2001 • **Organization Type:** 501(c)3 community-supported arts and music space • **Music Genre of Focus:** Popular music, emerging music • **Goings On:** Recently renovated a city-owned building into a state-of-the-art venue. Includes showroom, recording studio, silk-screen studio, ten shows and three workshops a month, one gallery opening a month, fifteen classes a month (on things like break dancing), seven formal internships with stipends, volunteer opportunities, partnerships with Seattle Academy, Rock School, and city festivals. • **Fees:** Free to $20 • **Where the Money Comes From:** The city of Seattle; foundation grants; individual donations; and earned income from shows, a few rentals, and small fees for classes. • **Claims to Fame:** Support from Pearl Jam, Death Cab for Cutie, Ian MacKaye, Shellac, Sub Pop Records. • **Local Scene:** Vera is the poster child for Seattle's all-ages scene, and one of the only stable venues offering all-ages shows on a consistent basis. The city is rich in resources — the music industry, sympathetic officials, arts funders, and music lovers.

SPOTLIGHT:

# THE VERA PROJECT

**Seattle, WA**

*By Britt Curtis*

I grew up in Reno, Nevada, until I was 17, when I fled to Seattle. I watched excitedly as Vera grew. It came of age right about the time I did, and by the time it was in full swing, I was 21. That didn't stop my curiosity, or my fascination. For five years, I murmured to myself, "Man, if only Reno had something like this ..."

After working with Vera in different capacities and being a long-time fan, I bit the bullet and moved back to Reno. At an age when most 20-somethings get as far away from their hometowns as possible, I, with a number of wonderful and dedicated Reno kids, started a project modeled after and inspired by the Vera Project: the Holland Project, named in homage to the Seattle Vera and the Dutch VERA that started it all.

## ONCE UPON A TIME: SEATTLE AND THE TDO

Imagine this if you can. In Seattle, the birthplace of both Jimi Hendrix and grunge, there existed a law — the Teen Dance Ordinance (TDO) — that had been in place since 1985 that made it virtually impossible (and illegal) for anyone between the ages of 15 and 20 to gather to listen to music or dance. Sound draconian? Sound strangely *Footloose*? It was.

Among the provisions slated in the ordinance should an all-ages event take place: three off-duty police officers were to be hired; a $1 million liability insurance policy was to be purchased and in

place; no one over the age of 18 was allowed in the vicinity unless accompanying someone under the age of 18; and those under the age of 15 had to have a guardian with them. It's no wonder that in the 17 years of the ordinance, very few promoter's licenses were issued or applied for. Hiring police officers and obtaining the insurance policy were so costly that almost no one who wanted to put on an event would be able to recoup the expense.

Definite abuse of the ordinance, mostly by police officers, also took place. By definition, the ordinance focused on underage dancing, but no clear distinction between dancing and listening to music was ever made. Thus, all concert events in which dancing may or may not have taken place in the audience were also covered.

The immediate results of the ordinance were felt at a time when Seattle was in the national spotlight for its burgeoning music scene. Many touring musicians refused to play Seattle because they'd only play to all-ages audiences. Young people had to travel outside the city to places like Redmond, a neighboring city that was home to the Old Fire House, a government-supported teen center founded by Seattleite Kate Becker that hosted all-ages shows.

The scene was set: no dancing and no music for teens. And soon the grumblings of some became the grumblings of many, which grew into widespread outrage and finally into action. This progression is important, not only for the story of the Vera Project, but in the story of community change. Sometimes, it's darkest before the light, and sometimes organizers have to work through years of darkness to get results.

There were lots of community efforts that tried to attack the Teen Dance Ordinance between 1987 and the late '90s, including the Youth Defense Brigade, the Teen Dance Ordinance Resistance, and the All-Ages Music Organization. And then, about the time Seattle was having its anti-globalization heyday, the tides began to turn. Using her track record for success in Redmond, Kate Becker, founder of the Old Fire House, joined forces with Greg Bennick and other local musicians and promoters and convinced the city of Seattle to do something. The city council's answer: the Music and Youth Task Force, a joint city and community group empowered to identify the current issues facing youth and to start to outline solutions.

Around the same time, the Joint Artists and Musicians Political Action Committee (JAMPAC), which had been founded by Krist Novoselic of Nirvana years earlier, joined the struggle.



Talbot Tagora at the Vera Project. Photo by Mong Kon Mo.

It was in this political climate that the foundation for Vera was laid and the TDO was finally repealed. But victory didn't come easily. A new youth-friendly ordinance was proposed and approved by the city council only to be vetoed by Seattle's then-mayor, Paul Schell. JAMPAC filed a lawsuit against the city, which they lost. But the young eventually prevailed when Schell was voted out of office, and the new mayor, Greg Nickels, championed the gentler All-Ages Dance Ordinance (AADO) in 2002.

The fight was not without fanfare. One of my favorite events from this period was a surprise dance-party attack by AADO proponents in city council chambers, with music provided by Ken Stringfellow (the Posies) and Sean Nelson (Harvey Danger). The other was the hilarious showdown between city council member Margaret Pageler and singer-songwriter Rocky Votolato: she literally chased him around a community center — local press even used the word "Frankenstein" in describing her outstretched arms — as AADO supporters danced (gasp!); Votolato dodged her while singing and playing guitar.

## NOW ENTER VERA

The formulation of Vera from concept to completion is a great story that could easily fill a book. For brevity's sake, here's a quick version of how it all began. James Keblas, a University of Washington student, is set to travel to the Netherlands, to a city called Groningen. Before he goes, he catches a Fugazi show (not surprisingly, booked by Kate Becker), and as luck or fate would have it, the opening band, the Ex, is from the Netherlands. He leaves with a name, Peter Weening, and a place — the VERA Club. With this blessing from the Ex, James is ushered into the VERA world as soon as he arrives in Groningen, and a dream world it was. Killer talent almost every night, mostly volunteer-run (from lights and sound to bartending to staffing the door), supported by the government, and always all-ages. Fellow UW student Shannon Stewart, also on the study abroad program in Groningen and an attendee of the fateful Fugazi/the Ex show, becomes a VERA regular as well. They soak up all things VERA and begin to form a vision of creating this sort of organization back home.

When they return to Seattle (still in the midst of the TDO struggle), it just so happens that the Music and Youth Task Force is

looking for answers — and James and Shannon have them.

## HOW IT BEGAN: THE STORY OF THE RELATIONSHIP TO THE CITY

When James returned from the Netherlands, he brought his report, called "The VERA Model," to the University of Washington. The university awarded both James and Shannon fellowships to continue their work, and with the fellowships came their most important tool: access. Because they had the legitimacy and credibility of a major academic institution behind them, they were given access to city hall and to people who would ultimately become their biggest and most important supporters. According to James, he believes this was, and is, a unique path. But what's not unique is the knowledge that you need to have credibility to move forward — and the best way to get that credibility is to find people who already have it, and reel them in. Whether it's a city council member or other local politician, head of the school district, a successful businessman, etc., find people with some clout and get them on your side. It's step one. For the Vera Project, this was city council member Richard Conlin and Kate Becker. Kate played such a huge role in helping Shannon and James understand and navigate city politics, she's considered by many to be Vera's strongest advocate and the third founder.

### Vera's First Steps

1. James and Shannon agreed that working with the city was fundamental to the vision of Vera and its success, and Vera could not exist if the city of Seattle wasn't behind it 100 percent. They worked out a model that worked within the confines of the local government, and that also relied on it for financial support. Shannon notes that she and James went to the city initially because they didn't know where else to go for funding. Surrounding areas all had government-sponsored teen centers, and the original VERA was entirely government-supported — so it made sense.
2. They got support, first from the university, and later from important city politicians, including Richard Conlin — the person both James and Shannon maintain kept Vera on the table in council discussions and agendas.
3. The city council and the Music and Youth Task Force backed the Vera Project based on the formal prospectus the



Ari Spool and Joshua Powell at the Vera Project. Photo by Curt Doughty

founders created. The timing was perfect, and the climate in Seattle was so bad that something had to give way. James maintains that it was very important that they were collaborative, instead of confrontational, in their relationship with the city. In fact, this is key to most of Vera's strategy of working with the city and not against it.

4. In 2001 and 2002, Seattle in a huge recession; the city was over $60 million in debt. Many thought it was crazy to start a nonprofit at the time, as programs and staff were getting cut right and left. Nevertheless, Vera got $25,000 from the city as seed money, and hosted its first show (featuring Murder City Devils, Botch, and the Blood Brothers) in 2001, a year and a half after beginning the start-up process.

It's also important to note that James and Shannon both had internships with the Seattle Arts Commission, where the director at the time, Susan Trapnell, was a huge ally. She allotted $20,000 of the arts commission budget to Vera, and advocated for other city departments to use some of their youth programming budgets to do the same. Additionally, with their leadership scholarships, James and Shannon were able to complete university-supported research projects that backed their case.

## A HIGH-MAINTENANCE RELATIONSHIP

Getting support from the city was one thing. Keeping the support and maintaining the relationship was much harder. In the early days, many hours were spent keeping the city in the loop by informing them of every step along the way; inviting them to events and fundraisers; giving city officials membership cards, personal letters, packets with any recent press on Vera, and an abundance of thanks in various forms (including postcards designed by local artists and signed by Vera members); and sending out quarterly reports on Vera activities. At the very beginning, Vera folks made sure they were a consistent presence at pertinent council meetings or related events, and made sure they delivered on each and every task asked of them.

By 2007, according to Vera executive director Shannon Roach, the relationship had become easier to maintain. The trust is there. Shannon R. believes the relationship is maintained in three crucial ways: comprehensive yearly reports; a continual feed of information, including keeping council members on the mailing list and updating them on current

events, recent press or achievements; encouraging participation with invitations to events, special occasions, and tours of the space.

Shannon R. also mentions that Vera staff, volunteers, and the board of directors are involved with the city on other levels — not related to Vera — and that these cross-relationships help keep Vera tied to the larger community and shore up its wider community support.

Vera is an example of excellent communication and relationship-building tools, including:

- Transparency and honesty
- Awareness of public issues
- Gratitude for public resources
- Delivery on promises

## "WHY DO KIDS NEED A PUNK PALACE, ANYWAY?": VERA AND THE COMMUNITY

Vera wasn't always in a $1 million state-of-the art venue. It once moved from place to place and would go months without being able to do shows. Now that Vera's in a long-term home — one they raised an incredible amount of money to secure — they get a little flack for being too clean, too shiny, too much in the city's pocket.

As a music-industry darling, Vera constantly runs the risk of being perceived as "selling out," but ultimately it remains a stronghold in the community, much like its Dutch inspiration.

Criticism of Vera comes mostly in these forms:

- "When I was young we didn't have this."
- "Vera doesn't book enough of X genre."
- "Being a nonprofit and working with the city isn't punk rock or DIY."
- "Vera depends too much on its community for funds and support, and takes the lion's share of funding, support and attention."
- "The Vera Project will never be as cool as VERA in the Netherlands."

Vera was never aimed at being solely a punk venue and,

unfortunately, it is legally, financially, and culturally impossible to emulate a Dutch music club; however, it's still the organization's responsibility to listen and respond. Now that the novelty has worn off, Vera has to continually find ways to address criticism without defensiveness in order to continue to be a responsive, relevant, and community-driven organization.

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## POP CULTURE AND POLITICS: BUILDING POWER AND CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

The Vera structure is keen on providing young people with a multitude of opportunities to learn and grow and to involve themselves in an abundance of issues, activities, skills and events. Because they have both the access and tools needed, Vera kids have the opportunity to learn how to maneuver through multiple industries — music, government, arts, politics, and more.

Because the culture of Vera is built on a relationship with the city and overcoming social and political odds, a civic engagement component is always lurking in the air — it's something that makes Vera both unique and exciting. It's also very Seattle. Seattle's music scene is political by nature, and Vera, as a part of that scene, is no different. Music and politics are very wed in the liberal Northwest, and it's normal for musicians and music industry people to know a lot about their local government, their candidates, and local, national, and world issues — and to be prepared to take a stand if need be. Vera fosters this, and though no Vera kids have yet run for government office (Vera founding board member Stephanie Pure ran for the state legislature in 2006, and James is now an appointed city official), I for one won't be surprised when it happens.

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## SEATTLE VS. EVERYWHERE ELSE: WHY SEATTLE MAKES VERA UNIQUE

It's not every city that has a stellar music community that continually births some of the best national talent; is home to rad record labels (Sub Pop, Barsuk, Suicide Squeeze, Sportn Life, Up Records) and music festivals (Bumbershoot, Capitol Hill Block Party, Sasquatch); boasts lots and lots of liberal people with lots and lots of money; has a philanthropic nature; has good sources of media including two weeklies, the *Stranger* and the *Seattle*

*Weekly*), countless bloggers, a university daily paper, and KEXP, one of the best independent radio stations in the United States; and has a history of activism and social change. But Seattle does.

Seattle — as a place — is as pertinent to the success of the Vera Project as any other element. Seattle has built-in support, people who believe in the vision without a lot of prodding. Its music and arts community is almost unparalleled, as is the amount of wealth the city holds and the amount people like to give.

The city is also no stranger to younger, vocal participants and active, successful young people, so the people behind Vera were in good company when they got going.

And you have the weather — nine months of gray make perfect conditions for seeing shows, silk-screening, making music, and other stuff like that.

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## IN SUM

Vera's fought a good fight, and has paved the way for people like me and projects like Holland to begin to exist all over the place. It's spawning a generation of involved, prepared, engaged, and aware young adults, now tackling their chosen industries all over Seattle and beyond. It's been a leader in recognizing and fostering the power of young people — and we in Reno are happy to join the movement.

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*Britt Curtis is the director of the Holland Project, Reno's first all-ages arts and music nonprofit. She has worked with various arts and issue-based organizations and music clubs, including the Seattle International Film Festival, Choice USA, Rock the Vote, and Pearl Jam.*

# VERA'S CIVIC RELATIONSHIP *IN ONE PAGE*

**What's Worked:**

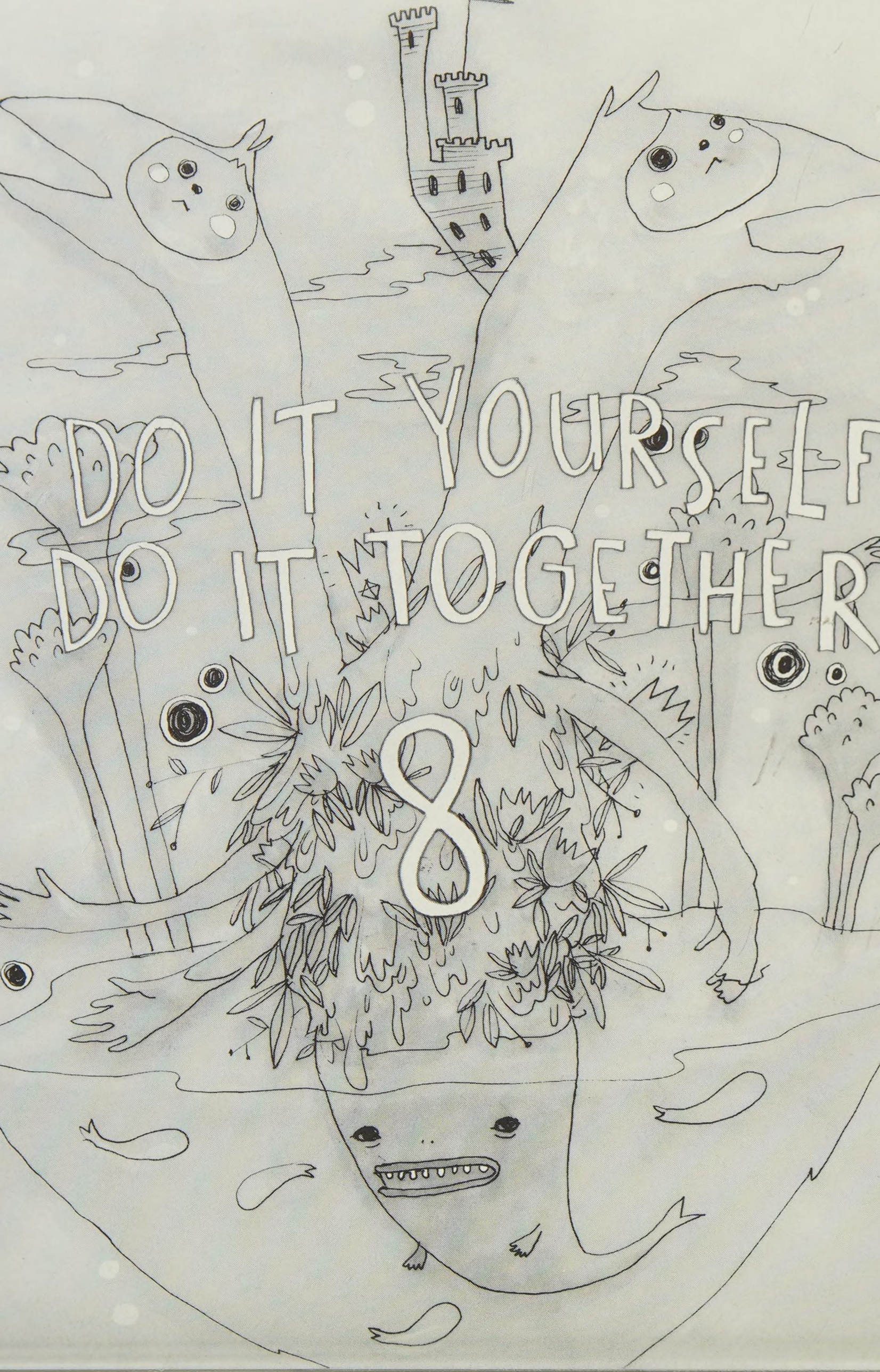
Choosing to be an independent nonprofit. • Going to the city for support right off the bat. • Getting existing music networks behind the project. • Leveraging a political moment, a moment when the will of the community was focused on solving music issues. • Keeping the city close: whenever Vera had a problem, leaders presented it to the city as if it were the city's problem as well.

**Issues That Come Up:**

Raising enough money to keep up with community demand. • Dealing with the public's negative perceptions of the organization. • Pouring a lot of energy into maintaining relationships with public officials.

**The Seattle Factors:**

One of the richest men in the world, Paul Allen, lives there and happens to have an interest in popular music. Lots of other wealthy people live there, too. • Lots and lots of bands, clubs, labels, music media coverage. • Some very awesome and supportive elected and appointed city officials (including Vera founder James, now the director of the mayor's Office of Film and Music). • The ability of arts organizations to afford expensive real estate in Seattle is so limited that organizations like Vera are slowly being moved one by one to the Seattle Center, an old World's Fair site that's farther away from Seattle's queer community and communities of color.


DO IT YOURSELF
DO IT TOGETHER
8

# CHAPTER EIGHT DO IT YOURSELF DO IT TOGETHER

## Putting It All Together



*Connect For: the sake of the kids, if nothing more / They can't afford to face another closed door, let's / Connect For: The prospect of steps uncharted / Pioneers in the context of "let's start it"*

Common Market • "connect for"

"How can a scene so large be so isolated?" writes Erik Lyle in *On the Lower Frequencies*, a book of his zine excerpts about the underground culture of cities. "How can creative, vibrant, activist houses, venues, and collective spaces be located in the heart of existing ghettos around the country and remain so completely insular and often irrelevant to the cities around them? I get frustrated because after a while I just get bored with what we're all doing and wonder what kind of possibilities would break open if we could share the energy and resources of these spaces with the cities around us. It seems like we are just a couple of ideas away from something really big, sometimes."

Mazi Mutafa, founder of the Washington, D.C.-based nonprofit Words Beats and Life, put together a meeting of hip-hop nonprofit representatives in California, and he asked a similar question: "Do you all work together? If not, what are the barriers?" People in the meeting offered up different reasons, from resources, time, and geography to ego and sometimes judgment about the way other organizations choose to do their work. Finally, all agreed that the way funding works is sort of a setup for a winner-takes-all mentality. One

organization is looked to as the best, and receives all the accolades and rewards for their work, while everyone else is overlooked.

In writing this book, the authors wanted to address some of these issues as well as respond, to the best of our ability, to the question, "How do I go about doing something like this where I live?" This question fills up the minds of people about to embark on starting an organization, as well as the email inboxes of those who have had some success. Why should it be such a mystery? You shouldn't have to know the right people or be independently wealthy to start a community organization.

Desire to replicate a good idea is by no means unique to youth music organizations. The fact that there are few resources in the midst of such demand, however, is a little unusual. You could chalk this up to things like:

- High turnover among young participants in collectives
- The maxed-out capacity of scene leaders
- Allergies to documentation and long-term thinking
- Leaders moving up and on without giving much thought to staying connected or mentoring others
- Lack of connection to other organizations with resources and energy that could help with overcoming issues, both small and large

Most commonly, though, a lot of folks want to avoid creating yet another homogenizing chain enterprise and would argue that it's fundamental for people to figure it out on their own — you know, DIY. There's inherent value in letting something grassroots be truly grassroots.

As pointed out earlier, that is one of the reasons this book focuses on multiplicity — offering suggestions and multiple models and perspectives without saying there's any one way to be a great community music organization; we certainly don't want to squish an organic cultural movement into a nonprofit franchise box. But we do want to push back on the unnecessary part of this thinking, which engenders isolation and undermines the ability to create impact beyond urban pockets. We want to broadcast far and wide the basics of how to do this, and then illustrate how that takes different shapes in different places. Most important in this chapter we want to demonstrate how many people and organizations are out there for us all to use as reference points and for support.

## DECIDING WHAT ROUTE TO GO

At some point, you have to decide which model is right for you. Maybe you know right off the bat, or you sort of figure it out over time. What kind of structure do you find yourself gravitating toward? Do you want to be a nonprofit community organization, an underground venue, or a business? Do you want to be collectively run or led by one or two people? Do you have a long-term goal? Does that include a venue? What would that look like?

Some basic questions to ask yourself:

- What's your idea, and why is it the right idea and scale?
- Is this a project that can grow new leaders, or is it dependent on one person to keep going?
- How much time do you want to give to this project in both the short term and long term? Who else needs to be involved from the get-go?
- Is it most important to you to serve a friend group, a very specific scene, or a broader community?
- How does where you live and your access to financial resources affect your decisions about operating legally?
- What organization(s) can you reach out to for help?
- Are you working toward concrete goals like increasing graduation rates among high-school-age youth, getting a certain number of kids off the streets? Or are your goals vaguer and more long-term, like making music scenes more experimental and democratic? Or do you have extremely short-term goals, like finding a place to have a show tonight?

Figuring out all of this will help you understand what organizational structure is the best fit. The rest of this chapter is geared toward building a mostly aboveground nonprofit community organization. It discusses learning from related fields and from the deaths of organizations no longer with us. It gives the basics of organizing and launching a project, and explains how to give and get support from one another.

# D-I-T IN YOUTH LITERARY ORGANIZATIONS:
## LEARNING FROM YOUTH SPEAKS AND 826 NATIONAL

Within the field of youth literary organizations — a world that has a different slant on the DIY mentality — two San Francisco organizations, Youth Speaks and 826 Valencia, started national networks to support people in other places who wanted to replicate their work.

Youth Speaks was founded in 1996 by poet and author James Kass and now has six chapters (with another dozen waiting in the wings). Their network is called Brave New Voices.

In 2001, Youth Speaks acted as the fiscal sponsor of another youth literary organization cofounded by award-winning author Dave Eggers. Within a year of the opening of 826 Valencia (which is part drop-in tutoring program for kids 8 to 18 and part pirate store), demand came pouring in from people around the country wanting to start 826-type organizations in their own communities. After putting a lot of thought and energy into understanding what that would take, 826 responded by starting 826 National, dedicating at least one full-time staff person to coordinating and offering these programs:

- An annual seminar open to anyone who can pay the registration fee of a few hundred dollars. The seminar offers instruction on everything from understanding why 826 services are important, to running the multitude of 826-type programs, to fundraising.
- An open application process for groups that are serious about starting an 826 affiliate. Qualifications include doing a community assessment, being connected to an education professional, making a plan for how you'll set up your space and raise money, and proven access to skilled volunteers.

826 National has accepted seven affiliates into its network, and its success grows in bounds only matched by that of the founding author's writing career.

Both Youth Speaks and 826 work toward a concrete outcome (increasing youth literacy) and are standardizing tactics (a storefront plus a youth program for 826, spoken-word programming in and after school for Youth Speaks). Beyond that, they leave a blank enough slate for the political and cultural creativity of folks in each city to make it uniquely it their own. While music culture is different from writing culture, there is a lot to learn from agreeing upon and growing a shared vision.

## THE GRAVEYARD

Every midsize to large town has an all-ages venue and youth organization graveyard. Between the mid-1980s and mid-2000s, in Seattle alone, I can count ten legal all-ages venues that shut down and another ten that were operating under the radar. Within a year of doing research to find as many youth music organizations in the United States as possible, almost 15 percent of them shut down or lost their space — and some of these had been around for ten years or more.

In talking to folks throughout this process, people kept telling me the names of beloved deceased organizations (Jabberjaw, Epicenter, Meow Meow, Velvet Elvis, Colorado Hip Hop Coalition, Sugar Shack, Strawberry Fields, Sugar Refinery, Underground Railroad, Monkey Mania, Yes Yes), pointing out how important it is to do an autopsy and tell the rest of the world what choices were made in those lives that brought them to an end. While the physical spaces have long since been replaced by commercial clubs, retail shops, condominiums, or parking lots, memorialized spaces live on in coffee-table books, Myspace profiles, and blogs. In poking around at the remains of Portland, Oregon's deceased all-ages venues, I found these bits and pieces of commentary about why some organizations fell to pieces.

"Davey Jones was your favorite venue. But you didn't take care of it and neither did we," reads the About section of the defunct all-ages venue's MySpace profile.[26]

Todd Fadel of the Meow Meow explains three fundamental problems he sees with people who want to start a legal all-ages organization:[27]

- Artists, the natural instigators of such a project, often don't have any organizing experience, business plans, or operating capital.
- Founders don't take into consideration the neighbors and the neighborhood.
- Show organizers don't make "all-ages" shows youth friendly.

As a new leader, how can you learn from the lessons of the past? How do we take care of our scenes, get the skills we

26 • www.myspace.com/daveyjoneslockr

27 • "What the Hell Happened to the Meow Meow?" http://www.urbanhonking.com/chalupa/archives/2005/07/what_the_hell_h.html, July 11, 2005.

need, and make sure our organization is serving the people we intended it to without pissing off the neighbors too much?

I've laid out some words of advice that were repeated again and again from the founders I interviewed, in sort of a linear fashion.

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## PHASE ONE: WHAT DO YOU WANT TO DO? WHO WILL GET BEHIND IT?

### Do Your Research

Because Mazi spends a fair amount of time figuring out how best to support other hip-hop nonprofits, I asked him what words of advice he would impart to someone trying to start a new music organization in their community, He said, simply, "Don't." He went on to say that his negative reaction was based on the fact that there were seven hip-hop organizations already in D.C., but that only one or two of them were actually healthy because the resources were stretched so thin.

Contrary to what you might think from that response, Words Beats and Life creates training and discussion opportunities, like the one mentioned earlier, specifically geared at sharing skills and ending isolation within the field. But Mazi's point remains: if you're interested in filling a void in your community, you need to do your homework and find out what else is going on in regards to youth and music programming, and what has happened in the past.

What's up with the house down the street doing shows, or the late-night teen program that the community center is running? If there isn't anything like what you're doing locally, do research nationally and look at what is working in other towns like yours.[28] If there are already youth music organizations in your area, try to fill in the gaps by working with a different age group or genre, working in another neighborhood if appropriate, or creating a new program at an existing organization. Try to assess what the community needs and think about how you can best fulfill that need.

For people who like concrete tools and processes, a SWOT analysis is a really good idea. SWOT stands for strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats, and SWOT analysis is used by CEOs and revolutionaries alike to take something that might seem overwhelming and break it down into some

28 • Our online directory at http://allages.net is a great place to start hunting.

# POSSIBLE SWOT ANALYSIS FOR MUSIC ORGANIZATIONS

**Strengths:**

We know a lot of bands and artists. • We have a lead on funding. • There are five of us.

**Weaknesses:**

We don't have space. • We don't have relationships with people who can help us get space. • We don't understand the permitting process.

**Opportunities:**

A lot of other organizations are struggling with the same issue. • City officials are sort of paying attention to the issue. • No one else is doing all-ages shows consistently. • There is at least one foundation that seems interested in youth music work.

**Threats:**

The last of the independent clubs was bought out. • Cops are targeting independent promoters. • Youth are being criminalized in our neighborhoods at alarming rates. • Our proposal might be seen as controversial by the community because of the proposed structure or misconceptions about the kind of music we play.

lists. It's a simple brainstorming process that you can do with your friends. Ask yourself: What are our strengths? What are our weaknesses? What are the opportunities? What are the threats?

Which of your strengths can help you address your weaknesses and threats? Can you ask all your artist friends if they know anything about potential spaces? What about using them to do community outreach? Can your funding connection put you in touch with another organization that has gone through getting space and the permitting process? Your lists will probably be longer, and will help you formulate a road map for moving forward.

**Reach Out to Your Potential Allies**

Using what you know from the SWOT analysis, develop a list of youth, art, and/or music organizations locally and national to approach for resources or support. Approach them knowing what kind of information you need to get out of them. If you're asking them to spend time with you, offer to do something beneficial for them in exchange, like writing a letter of support. Having someone from another organization as a guide can be a critical part of the start-up process and is talked about in-depth in the last part of this chapter.

**Create a Survey**

What kind of information do you need in order to make sure you'll get community support? What kind of information do you need to back up your case to funders and officials? A survey is another good information-gathering tool. A survey can be as simple as doing interviews with five other organizations, or going to schools or shows and getting 100 kids to fill out a short anonymous form.

When I was 22, I did a survey at some shows that asked questions like:

- What else besides going to shows do you do in your spare time?
- How many shows do you go to in a month?
- What's your favorite band?
- What's your favorite venue?
- Where else do you hang out?
- How many of your friends go to shows with you?
- How important is music to you in defining who you are?
- If there were a dedicated music space/program for you, what would you want it to include?

- Would you like to be involved in creating a dedicated space/program for the community?

The most important aspect of doing outreach and getting input is making sure you really take it all in — really listen. There may be a lot of diverging views, and you are not going to be able to please everyone, but working to address the major themes in the feedback you get is critical to being a relevant organization.

**Put It on Paper!**

Combining your ideas with the research you've gathered, draft a proposal for starting your organization. It doesn't have to be anything fancy, but it should cover who, what, why, and how. You must have your ideas written down before you can approach advisors, funders, or potential collaborators.

While you should be ambitious in outlining what you want to accomplish, you should also be realistic in moving forward. Break your idea up into stages of implementation. As we mentioned in Chapter 6, about funding, you should first try a pilot project or test run. Plan to put out one record, one series of classes, or one set of shows and see how it goes. What do you need in order to do the first stage? How much money? What kind of space? How many people?

## PHASE TWO: ORGANIZING

**Building an Army**

Now that you know what exactly you need, how are you going to get it? Or, to rephrase that — who are you going to build relationships with to get it? Hopefully you already have a couple of friends roped into this with you, but now, who else do you need (like sound engineers, bookkeepers, artists, computer techs, fundraisers, and probably a few people to help with general tasks)?

Some outreach steps you can take are:

- Posting flyers around town about starting your organization and holding community meetings where you talk about the purpose, mission, and vision.
- Identifying specific individuals you want to get involved in the project and trying to entice them in.

### Getting Financial Support

Fundraising is as essential to building your organization as programming and doing outreach. It helps to build your base and communicate that the project cannot be sustained without money. A strong written proposal, with research and anecdotal stories, along with a growing community of potential attendees, participants, and allies is the best place to start fundraising from. The different funding options are talked about in-depth in Chapter 6. Now is the time for you to analyze your opportunities. Does it seem plausible that you could talk to a government agency for support? Is there a friend of a friend's parents who might have some money to donate? Are you most comfortable with hosting secret cafés, benefits, and sending fundraising letters? Can you get a couple of well-known artists to donate tracks to make a compilation? As mentioned in Chapter 6, earned income models (such as benefit concerts and compilations) require the most amount of work for the least amount of return; however, they're a good place to start if you're just beginning fundraising.

In order to start finding funding:

- Set a fundraising goal. How much money do you need to raise in order to do the first phase of your project?
- Decide on the most likely sources for reaching that goal.
- If you have a large enough group working on the project, create a dedicated fundraising committee and have them go to it.

### Putting the "All" in All-ages

Todd from the Meow Meow made an important point about what it means to do all-ages shows in a society where people under 21 are often banned from live music venues. All-ages shows are for everyone, but especially for young people. And music programs that are explicitly for youth must be designed by them as well. Unfortunately, in general, youth have less access to the resources it takes to do things like raise money, and secure space.

Depending on how old you are, here some thoughts on getting support from people of all ages.

*Getting Adult Allies.* If you're a young person or group of young people trying to get something going, find a local mentor and some adult allies. These people can help you navigate complicated systems, open funding doors for you, and get their phone calls returned. They could

be a teacher, the owner of a local record store, a church elder, a community leader, a band member, or a parent — basically, someone you trust. Approach potential adult advisors with your written plan in hand.

*Working with Young People.* If you're a group of adults wanting to do something for young people, you must work in partnership with young people. Check out the spotlight on the Neutral Zone in Chapter 3 for a great example of intergenerational collaboration.

*Going for Age Diversity.* If you're a group of youngish adults who have recently graduated from the realm of all-ages and you're excited to give back, that's awesome. You still have all the knowledge of the scene along with newfound adult access to resources. In this situation, you probably still need a few folks over 30 or 40 to lend their professional expertise — and you'll definitely need to work with younger people to keep you connected to the youths!

## PHASE THREE: PILOT

The stage is set and it's time to host your first program/show. If you've done your homework, most things will go well. Other things will crash and burn. This is to be expected.

As you're getting into the flow of things and gaining experience, it's important to remember the part about doing things in stages. This kind of work is so fun and rewarding, but it is still *hard*. At points you may find yourself thinking things like:

"Putting on shows is a nightmare of a thankless job and anyone who's in a band should be forced to do it at least once. Organizers have to deal with neighbors, cops, landlords, drunken idiots, egotistical musicians, and every other nightmare personality types just so three or four crummy bands can blow out your eardrums and then bitch about how they weren't paid enough." (from *Genetic Disorder*'s review of the 924 Gilman book)

So please pace yourself. You may have visions of providing multiple programs and hosting events every night, but try to focus on doing one or two things well first, and making sure you have the support and resources you need to keep going.

**Did It Work?**

By doing a pilot program, you're setting yourself up to evaluate your idea when the project is over. To do this, you keep track of some things.

For instance, you could keep track of how many people came to each show, or how many hours you spent in the studio with the recording artists. You should also adopt a scrapbook mentality and start saving everything — posters, photos, tickets, videos, and audio recordings.

Then, evaluate. The best way to make sure you'll actually do this is by scheduling yourself time to do so.

To best evaluate your work, you should:

- Set up a few concrete ways to track things, like setting up a spreadsheet to keep track of attendance or a folder to keep class evaluations in.
- Take a second stab at a SWOT analysis. Ask yourself and your collaborators what was successful, what was challenging, what opportunities exist to make things better, and what things could potentially endanger your work. And, yeah, write it down!

## PHASE FOUR: BIG-PICTURE REFLECTION

After you've gotten a feel for what you do well and not so well, and how the community responds, you're in a good place to reflect on the big picture. What did you set out to do? Are you doing it?

Chances are you're doing your mission times 100. When you're running a public venue, working with young people, or participating in the music industry, a lot of peripheral issues come up that you may feel compelled or obligated to work on. You might want to start a pirate radio station, launch a political campaign, provide sexual assault counseling, offer tai chi classes, and host a sewing circle on top of everything else you're doing. After a while, it will become clear which things

make sense to include and which things don't. Lisa Dengiz, one of the founders of the Neutral Zone, says having great partnerships is key to dodging "mission drift" — doing something clearly outside of what you set out to do. If you feel like you're in over your head on something, or you know that someone else is already doing something similar, team up.

Sometimes the idea that we can do everything is tied back to an idea about our music subculture being our identity, that punk or hip-hop can be all things to all people. That it would be cheesy to work with other organizations that aren't as hip, and that we have all the answers.

Going back to the graveyard, I found this insightful piece of information from a former member of the Epicenter in San Francisco. After his experience with the legendary collective space that housed a record store, a zine archive, occasional shows, and many community meetings, Gordon Zola calls for more self-awareness from those organizing around subcultures like punk. "The [cultural collectives] that survive generally have examined and worked against the idea of their own subcultural supremacy."

I take this to mean that because people at Epicenter weren't actively trying to be aware and push back on the limitations of punk (that it can be really insular, that it's mostly white and focused on individual lifestyle choices rather than strategies for systemic change), they weren't aware of the limitations that would eventually cause their demise.

Similarly, in his seminal book-zine, *Bomb the Suburbs,* Billy Wimsatt writes: "Hip Hop isn't gonna pay your rent. Hip Hop isn't gonna pay your grocery bill, your electric bill. Hip Hop doesn't stop bullets, doesn't put a marriage back together or regulate a corporation or change a government policy. It doesn't do most of the things we need a culture or a way of life to do for us." Billy goes on to explain that hip-hop is an entry point for thinking about all of those things — a bridge to the people and possible resources that can help.

The thing about illusions of subcultural supremacy is that they can get in the way of the impact that working in music and art promises. Underground music and art communities have accomplished incredible things, both in the process of coming aboveground and bringing marginalized artists with them, or staying off the radar and nurturing forms of expression that would never break in a bar or commercial venue. Just as music is one piece of an individual's identity, our organizations are one piece of communities, cities, and a widespread cultural

shift radiating from the underground. Done the right way — with self-awareness, commitment, enthusiasm, and partnerships with people working in all these other areas — your community music work can change things.

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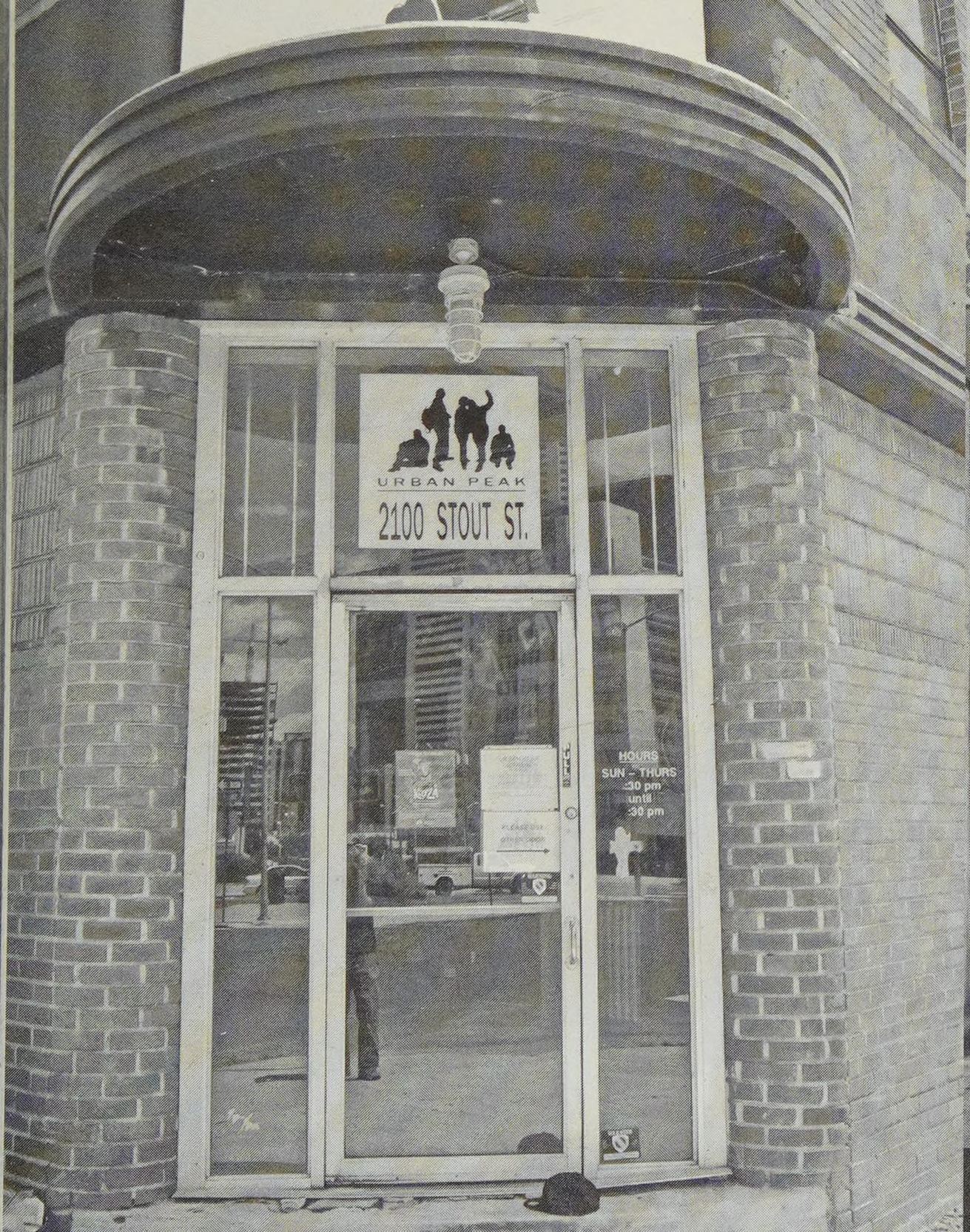
### PHASE FIVE: RENOVATE, REMIX, AND REPEAT

Onward!

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### DIT SPOTLIGHT

It helps to know the steps to get going, and the ins and outs of booking, funding, and getting space, but nothing can replace person-to-person guidance and support. Your most useful resource is going to be someone at another organization who can help. You can expect that their time will be really limited, and you'll need to know in advance what kind of help you need. Because truly collaborating and helping one another takes time, resources, and commitment, it's a give-and-take on both sides. We can learn a lot from looking at how organizations like the Spot in Denver, Colorado, and Elementz in Cincinnati, Ohio, have taken great strides to empower other communities to do similar work. These people have figured out something about how to allow autonomous and organic development while providing critical support and inspiration. They have updated do-it-yourself to do-it-together.







The Spot and Elementz. Photos by Chris Adolf and Brother Abdullah

# VITALS

# THE SPOT

**Located:** Denver, Colorado • **Founded:** 1993 • **Organization Type:** Nonprofit urban youth center • **Music Genre of Focus:** Hip-hop • **Goings On:** Drop in space Sunday thru Thursday from 4:30-9:30 pm with breakdancing, djing, music recording, digital graphics, a GED program, and community support to exit street and gang life. • **Fees:** Free • **Where the money comes from:** Initially through oil donors, now after a merger with Urban Peak, the Spot is supported by individual donors and large local, state, and federal grants. • **Founding Story:** After the Summer of Fear, Dave Deforest-Stalls sought out a neutral space for peace and safety for young people in Denver, Colorado. With the support of youth involved in gangs, Dave started the hip-hop-based center. • **Claims to Fame:** The Spot is a safe space for young people to relax and build community connections. Offers a continuum of youth services from street outreach and a drop-in space, to opportunities to directly engage youth in counseling, case management, and earning their GED. • **The Local Scene:** Housed just off the main streets of downtown Denver, Colorado, the Spot is neutrally located from gang territories to ensure that youth feel safe when they arrive, regardless of where they come from.

# ELEMENTZ

**Located:** Cincinnati, Ohio • **Founded:** 2005 • **Organization Type:** Nonprofit youth-driven center • **Music Genre of Focus:** Hip-hop • **Goings On:** Open Tuesdays, Wednesdays, and Thursdays from 5-10 pm featuring 4 recording studios, DJing, hip-hop dancing, breakdancing, and graffiti art. Power Players leadership development program meets weekly, along with the Campaign for Youth encouraging civic engagement. Finally, there is Tha Hip Hop Café. • **Fees:** $10 annual membership fee. • **Where the money comes from:** 90% comes from the local community including foundations, donors, and memberships and 10% comes from national grants. • **Claims to Fame:** Respect is the only rule for the first 17 months and still the guiding principle. A youth-driven process from the beginning, commitment to community-based leadership and development in a conservative Midwest city. • **The Local Scene:** Elementz is located in West End/Over-the-Rhine, which is the largest historic district in the United States due to its 19th-century architecture. Now it is a largely disinvested community with high vacancy rates, buildings in disrepair, a large homeless population, and open-air drug dealing on the streets. Ironically, it is adjacent to downtown Cincinnati's looming skyscrapers, with the threat of gentrification coming from all angles.

SPOTLIGHT:

# THE SPOT AND ELEMENTZ

**Denver, CO / Cincinnati, OH**

*By Lori Roddy*

**A CRITICAL TIME + THE RIGHT LEADERS + COMMUNITY RESOURCES + YOU = HIP-HOP YOUTH CENTER**

These are the common variables that reflect the connection between the start-up of two thriving hip hop urban youth spaces — the Spot and Elementz. Despite the challenges of low funds, negative stereotypes, and lack of time, the success of these centers is visible in the numbers of young people who gather to write graffiti on a wall, share their dance moves, or record their latest beats. For this reason, countless numbers of weekly phone calls, visits, and emails from people seeking advice bombard these centers every week. This is the close-up feature of two communities, their connection to each other, and the emergence of best practices led by visionary leaders who took an uncommon approach to creating a place of respect during a time of violence.

## IT WAS A CRITICAL TIME

In Denver, Colorado, the summer of '93 was renamed the Summer of Fear. It was a time when seventy-four homicides occurred, and nearly half, thirty-six, of the victims were teenagers. These random

acts of violence, mostly gang-related, shook the city when a 5-year-old African-American boy was shot in the head, a 10-month-old child was hit while visiting the Denver Zoo, and a young boy was shot in the arm while playing on his aunt's porch.[29] While the city responded by sentencing children to life in prison without parole, one man took another approach. Dave Deforest-Stalls, an ex-NFL player, founded the Spot, a place established to meet the need for a safe space located in a neutral gang territory downtown.

The summer of 2001 in Cincinnati, Ohio, is known for its infamous race riots. In April, 19-year-old Timothy Thomas was shot and killed by a police officer. After a number of other deaths of black men at the hands of police, Thomas's death led to explosive riots by the African-American community. In a community called Over-the-Rhine — a largely marginalized, poverty-stricken area — several leaders including Life Allah, Islord Allah, Dureka Bonds, and Gavin Leonard had been having regular discussions in a barbershop about housing, drugs, and police issues; the riots led them to turn those discussions into a community organizing effort. That summer, Copwatch, a group of community folks who cared about police accountability, emerged to monitor the interactions between police and citizens. After two years, the group established Citizens Organizing Neighborhoods to Regain Our Liberation (CONTROL). The organization became a legal nonprofit organization in order to "promote creativity, accountability, and equality by providing relevant resources."[30] Establishing Elementz, a hip-hop youth center, became a primary focus for CONTROL as a way to ensure that young people in Over-the-Rhine were provided community resources to gather, build community, and promote change.

29 • Fred Brown, "Gang Fear Lurks in Shadows," *The Denver Post*, July 12, 2007.

## LEADERS STEPPED UP

From the beginning, Dave Deforest-Stalls's leadership approach was centered on listening. He recalled one of his most important meetings with a young person whom he had brought to the Spot for some advice. The young man told Dave to buy a large piece of carpet and linoleum, and later returned with his friends and a dual cassette player to create what would become one of the finest breakdancing places in the city. Not much later, the same young man asked Dave to buy some cans

30 • Board of directors of Elementz, Elementz Organization Strategic Plan, 2006.

of spray paint; he wanted to put the Spot on the map in the Denver graffiti movement. The dual cassette player turned into the need for DJing turntables, and before long there was a need to record the rhymes. The center's activities built on each other, naturally based on youth interests.

The idea to start a hip-hop-based center in Cincinnati was Islord Allah's. Born and raised in Cincinnati, Islord conceived of the idea and brought it to the table at an early CONTROL meeting; then the group went to work bringing it to fruition. Growing up in Over-the-Rhine, and also co-owning a barbershop in the neighborhood, Islord had a deep understanding of the community, especially its young people. Gavin Leonard's knack for details and organizing — along with the skills of other cofounders and a long list of volunteers — made the work possible.

## FINDING THE RIGHT MODEL

Gathering knowledge of best practices, identifying community needs, and sharing the results with those who can provide financial backing are critical. Gavin began where most of us would, an internet search of hip-hop youth centers. He found the Spot, one of the earliest established adolescent youth centers with the infrastructure to respond to requests. In fact, Dave deliberately designed the Spot's web page for people who searched keywords like "youth," "teen," "gang violence," and other common phrases. Leaders like Gavin sought, and Dave sought to be found. Dave, who had been receiving countless emails and phone calls from a range of activists, parents, teens, and youth programs, initiated a weekend training in Denver on how to start a teen center. Gavin and Dureka Bonds, cofounder and current board president of Elementz, spent a weekend in Denver to connect, network, and begin to explore the opportunity to build an urban youth center. Dave provided a 300-page manual of critical information — from how to start a 501(c)(3) organization to how to create a business plan. The training also included safety issues, such as how to recognize red flags and strategies to diffuse potentially violent situations. Finally, the youth from the Spot shared their perspectives through panel discussions on what they thought worked best about the Spot. It was the one-stop shop for starting a youth center.

Returning home, the CONTROL team worked with other community leaders to assess the needs of the residents who lived in

Over-the-Rhine and the West End — what young people refer to as "downtown." The group's first goal was to ensure that there was awareness, feedback, and support from the youth of their targeted population — those who lived in the disinvested areas of the urban core — so they surveyed over 1,000 young people. Going beyond visiting classrooms and holding meetings, Elementz organizers talked to people on buses and street corners, working to ensure that those who are traditionally silenced were part of the driving force for what Elementz would become. These surveys provided the information that guided efforts to lobby for support and create a space that resonated with the targeted youth population.

In addition to conducting the surveys, CONTROL sought out other support from key leaders, city council members, and anyone who might potentially come forward as financial backers or board members. "Find supporters who are willing to take risks," Dave says. He was always up-front with Spot donors, telling them that the investment was a risk worth taking, but he could make no promises. The Spot and Elementz seek to serve a population of youth who are unlikely to engage in more traditional programs; in conjunction with the issues of violence the organizations were founded to address, these realities mean that the space won't always produce shiny, happy public relations opportunities. At the end of the day, however, the effectiveness of the work will speak for itself, press or no press. Gavin wholeheartedly agrees that donors who are willing to take risks are critical in creating a program that reaches youth where they're at instead of where we expect them to be. The support did trickle in. The Greater Cincinnati Foundation provided a $30,000 matching grant, and the dream of Elementz was off the ground. In the midst of this, Elementz leaders brought David out for a follow-up training on their home turf in Cincinnati.

## YOUNG PEOPLE GOT INVOLVED

Lots of great adults create unsuccessful youth projects. However, both the Spot and Elementz are thriving because youth engage in the opportunities the organizations provide, and participate in their leadership. When I asked Dave what the necessary components to building a successful youth space are, he responded with: a predictable space, activities, and relationships.

**Predictable Space**

The Spot, located on the corner of Stout and 21st Street in

downtown Denver, is a simple building that used to be a theater. It now features a sign calling young people to enter. Inside the space reflects the local hip-hop culture in its graffiti-decorated walls, and includes a break-dancing room with a fenced-in DJ booth, a multipurpose room, a myriad of bold-colored recording rooms, and, upstairs, a large meeting room with all the essentials of couches, a TV, a pool table, and a kitchen. It's a space to hang, own, and engage.

After looking at dozens of buildings, CONTROL found the right location for Elementz: a 3,500-square-foot space for $1,800 a month. Here too, large graffiti pieces welcome young people as they enter. Most of the other walls are covered with upcoming album release posters and artwork made by the youth. The computer lab and front lobby overflow with people hanging out waiting for studio time or to take audio-production classes. In addition, there's a large outdoor wall built for graffiti writing practice. The place is loud; sounds compete from various places. And there's no doubt that youth are wandering the halls spitting rhymes in preparation for a recording or for an impromptu battle.

**Relationships**

When I met with Dave and Gavin, they made it clear to me that the Spot and Elementz recognize the importance of building successful youth and adult relationships. Dave emphasizes the foundation of the Spot: "Respect. This is the only rule at the Spot; it is of the highest expectation." The rule keeps the space safe, but it also supports building meaningful relationships. On all levels, adults who are board members, donors, or program volunteers understand that the youth give respect and deserve to have it in return. One of the key ways of demonstrating respect is through listening. Dave emphasized how the staff is trained to listen. Dave even hired a staff person whose only job is to listen, a person trained to find opportunities to listen to young people. In addition, staff members listen to the youth to identify and drive the youth programs. There are also some formal structures at the Spot for youth to give feedback, such as a weekly advisory council meeting to allow groups to come together and build community relationships.

Gavin also emphasizes listening. At Elementz, large sheets of paper go up on the wall asking youth about what they want. Respectful relationships are the fundamental principle interwoven through all aspects of both organizations; youth are valuable members of the community and their voices matter. Basically, when a young person speaks, adults listen and work

DJ workshop at Elementz

with him or her to provide support.

**Activities**

Both Elementz and the Spot are responsive to the youth in their community and meet them where they are at, grounding their resources and services in hip-hop-focused programming. And while both clearly believe in young people emerging as success stories, the organizations have taken different paths to connect and offer young people programming. Elementz, a much younger organization, is still grounded in the philosophy of building a strong community of young people who are invested in creating positive change in their community. Getting young folks involved in the center's hip-hop programs is just the beginning of giving them a voice and ultimately getting them civically engaged.

On the other hand, the Spot has gone through a significant change. After eight years, Dave resigned from his role as executive director of the Spot, but not before supporting a merger between the Spot and Urban Peak. Urban Peak serves as a social service agency, providing a shelter, meal program, case management, and job training to help runaway youth get off the streets. Merging the two organizations has provided a larger continuum of services; the youth who drop into the center are often facing similar issues to those who are runaways. According to Wendy Talley, the program director, "The Spot has changed; it has become an array of services focused on healing wounded youth through a positive youth development focus, building on youth assets of self-determination."

## WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

While they each have their own experiences, both the Spot and Elementz have new challenges. The directors of Elementz seek ways to evaluate programs, professionalize a staff both with salaries and training, and develop a more mature board of directors. Leaders at the Spot are still working to ensure a successful merger with Urban Peak by building relationships with youth, staff, and donors to offer a continuum of youth services while sustaining the free drop-in feel of a recreation center. But this much is true: they all recognize the value of their work and want to share it with others.

Those who work to initiate and direct places like the Spot and Elementz have lessons to share. There are best practices,

including timing, leadership, gaining support, and working with youth. But there is also a larger lesson to learn — we do not have to go it alone. Through sharing our experiences and connecting to one another, this powerful support and community network builds the case to others that youth spaces are possible, meaningful and effective.

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*Lori Roddy is the associate executive director of the Neutral Zone, an Ann Arbor-based youth-driven teen center providing afterschool space with programming in education, literary and visual arts, music, leadership, and weekend concerts. Prior to Neutral Zone, Lori worked as a social studies teacher in Cleveland, Ohio, and as a consultant for the Youth and Community Project at the University of Michigan.*

# HOW THE SPOT HELPED ELEMENTZ *IN ONE PAGE*

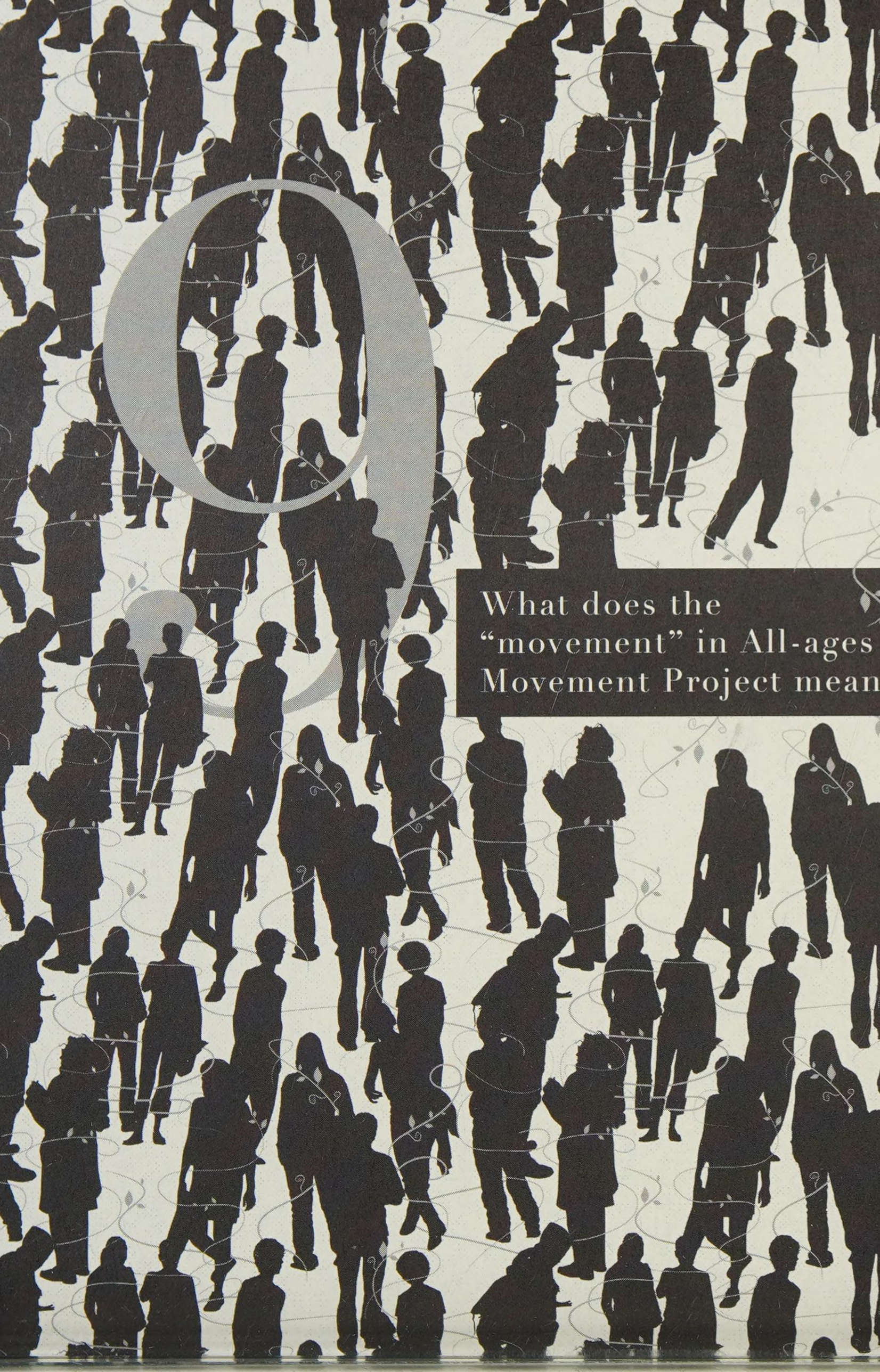
**What's Worked at the Spot:** Advocating for positive youth spaces everywhere. • Emphasizing music programming and youth guidance as principal strategies. • Making the founding story readily available to others who need advice. • Actively training new leaders from other communities.

**What's Worked at Elementz:** Surveying the community. • Doing research on organizational role models. • Putting in the resources and time to make Dave's support and guidance possible (and paying for his travel costs).

**Issues at the Spot:** Having the recognition and access to wealth that comes with being an ex-NFL player is not the experience of most youth leaders or youth service providers. • Time spent training people from other communities means less time to give directly to one's own organization. • Now that Dave has left, the start-up mentoring and training aspect of the organization no longer formally exists.

**Issues at Elementz:** Fundraising in the Midwest, away from progressive funders most likely to support a program like Elementz, is difficult. • With few relevant professional development opportunities in the area, it's hard to maintain and train new leadership.

**The Denver and Cincinnati Factors:** Denver is a much larger and whiter city than Cincinnati, but in both places, the youth population makes up a third or more of the population that face enormous economic disparities and lack of opportunities. Also, because of the similarities of being a mid-sized inland city with mixed political and cultural environments, these two places have more in common than, say, Cincinnati and Seattle. • Funding in Denver, however, is more readily available; the median household income is more than $10,000 greater than Cincinnati's.



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What does the
"movement" in All-ages
Movement Project mean

CHAPTER NINE

# WHAT DOES THE "MOVEMENT" IN ALL-AGES MOVEMENT PROJECT MEAN?

Artwork • Andrio Abero

At the end of a roundtable discussion addressing the above question is Gavin Leonard, one of the founders of Elementz: The Hip Hop Youth Arts Center in Cincinnati, Ohio, observed, "So, it's black and it's white and it's rich and it's poor and it's rural and it's urban — *that's* the reality of what we're working to reach." He went on to explain that the movement is made up of young people in every town who come together around music to experience it first hand as well as connect to activism, social justice, and community change.

Restating this sentiment in different words, Lori Roddy from the Neutral Zone in Ann Arbor, Michigan, added that the purpose of the movement is for young people to build power and "impact culture" instead of culture always being "impacted onto them."

"Yeah, just write that!" Gavin said to me, laughing.

Here's where the book breaks format. I've spent seven chapters talking about and compiling the what, where, and how (shows, records, space, money, organizational structure). This final part represents a conversation between the writers of this book addressing the bigger picture: the "why" part of our work. In the room:

- Diaris Alexander, chair of the Cultural Affairs Committee and Hip Hop Congress at UCLA (Los Angeles, California)
- Kevin Erickson, resident worker at the Department of Safety (Anacortes, Washington)
- Gavin Leonard, cofounder of Elementz: The Hip Hop Youth Arts Center (Cincinnati, Ohio)

- Lori Roddy, program director of the Neutral Zone (Ann Arbor, Michigan)
- Chris Wiltsee, founder of Youth-Owned Records (Ann Arbor, Michigan) and founder and executive director of Youth Movement Records (Oakland, California)
- Shannon Stewart (me), cofounder of the Vera Project (Seattle, Washington), member of Club Sandwich (San Francisco, California), and coordinator of AMP

Weighing in on this conversation via follow up e-mails:

- Kameron Moore-Mitchell, Idlemindz Media and Entertainment Group (New Orleans, Louisiana)
- Katy Otto, drummer and collective member of Positive Force (Washington, D.C.)
- Britt Curtis, founder of the Holland Project (Reno, Nevada)

Demographically, we have some things in common. We all have some college education, are under 35, and are working or have worked as staff for youth and arts nonprofits. On the other hand, factors like race, class, age, sexual orientation, demographics of the communities we work in, geographical location, and whether our organizations are legal or not, funded or not, and/or connected to the music industry or not, are different and play a huge role in informing our perspectives.

Because we're responding to needs in different communities, our notions and practice of social change vary greatly. As a result, this discussion was focused on bringing to light the experiences we don't share, and our different approaches to doing community-based work involving youth and music.

## GETTING TO KNOW OUR IDEOLOGIES

Before getting into an in-depth discussion, we brainstormed short answers to questions related to music, youth culture, and social and cultural change. What is the impact of music on culture? How do youth get to participate? How is this connected to community, social, and cultural change?

At first, our answers illustrated how we were all surprisingly on the same page, even if we weren't really feeling the same sentences. Music is populist by nature. Youth culture is too commercially driven. Young people should be creating and leading on social, political, and artistic fronts, but all kinds of things get in

the way. Basically, we agreed that there are some big problems.

As we were pushed to further articulate the problems and propose solutions, our organizations' respective missions and ideologies emerged. We agreed that social change and cultural change go hand and hand, and described what change looks like with varying degrees of specificity.

On what social change meant specifically to our organizations, we said:

- "Decentralized possibility." (Kevin, Department of Safety, Anacortes)
- "Intergenerational, participatory, generative communities." (me, AMP, San Francisco)
- "...for all." (Gavin, Elementz, Cincinnati)
- "Inequality eradicated, marginalized voices valued, youth engagement, and action." (Chris, YMR, Oakland)
- "Civically engaged young people, education reform." (Diaris, UCLA Hip Hop Congress, Los Angeles)
- "Positive perceptions of youth, recognition of their leadership." (Lori, Neutral Zone, Ann Arbor)
- "Young punk rockers as volunteers for social service/change organizations, music as the awareness-raising vehicle. (Katy, Positive Force, D.C.)
- "Young people stay[ing] in Reno, help[ing] it grow and shap[ing] it, instead of fleeing to other cities and towns." (Britt, Holland Project, Reno)
- "More engaged youth — with my own music, I speak directly to my peers, to get them engaged and continue the movement." (Kameron Moore-Mitchell, emcee and hip-hop educator, New Orleans).

In our post-brainstorm discussion, Kevin compared his role as the representative of a mostly white, small-town alternative arts space to the role of Gavin, the staff person at a mostly African-American hip-hop center in the third-poorest city in the country: "Well, it seems like you are kind of in a role of really needing to build people up and I'm kind of in a role of needing to break people down and get them outside of their usual perceptions," Kevin stated, illustrating one take on the way race and privilege affects their respective communities. Without doing overt political and community organizing work, the DoS provides a first step for the young people that come through its doors — the space to step out of the mainstream so that they can start to question things and see other possibilities.

As a founder of the Vera Project, I related to that sentiment. It

could also be said that Vera has a role in "breaking [our own] people down," while simultaneously trying to build young people up. In the time that Vera was founded, four moderately famous white men in the local music scene were accused of sexual assault and rape. There was a resurgence of nationalistic white power music. Security guards were looking the other way as people of color were attacked in clubs. So, though there was a very big institutional struggle going on in the city government around age restrictions in Seattle at the time (see Chapter 7), there was also an internal struggle focused on breaking down white supremacy, violence, and criminalization of one another within our own community. With guidance of local social and racial justice organizations, Vera community members made deliberate and focused attempts at challenging the culture of the scene.

There are some similar threads but also some very stark differences to the start-up of Elementz in Cincinnati and Batey Urbano in Chicago. In these cases, young people were dying at the hands of institutional neglect and police brutality, and critical organizing was done with the young people most affected. Hip-hop was used as an organizing tool as part of an intentional set of initiatives aimed at addressing how institutional oppression directly affects the youths' communities. The plan: start with music, use its power to move toward analysis and actualization, develop leaders, and try to get them to replace the ones that are screwing people over. In this sense, progressing toward social and racial justice is why they do what they do. It's the endgame, and music is a vehicle.

Lori brought this up, too. "We have a total of twenty-three after-school program-based initiatives that we put on, and four of those are music-related." In the case of the Neutral Zone, the organization's end goals are youth ownership, leadership, and liberation. The people running the organization come at those goals from almost every possible angle. Because of this, Lori sees music as one of many centralizing forces in social change activity and not the be-all end-all.

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## CHECKING THE "YOUTH ORGANIZATION" BOX

Talking about the goals of youth leadership raises the question of how we define youth within our organizations. The Neutral Zone, like many youth or teen centers, only serves

high-school-age people. At UCLA's Hip Hop Congress, the leadership positions are restricted to college-age young people.

The rest of the organizations represented are more fluid with the definition of youth, or they extend the age bracket to include young adults up to 24 or 25. Gavin explained that, at Elementz, *development* delineates program participation more than *age*. More and more organizations, like Elementz and Vera, include young adults in programs because having young folks cut off from services and support at 18 is leaving a lot of young people in a world of hurt — especially young people who cannot or choose not to go to college, and therefore lack access to the structure and resources colleges provide for people transitioning into adulthood.

Organizations like the Department of Safety, on the other hand, were started by young adults serving their peer network. As they have gotten older, the age difference between leaders and participants has grown, and outreach to youth has become more and more central to their programming.

Kevin explains: "[The DoS] essentially started as a DIY art space and over time began incorporating a youth focus organically, yet it's important to us to never be something that could be called a 'teen center.' Even if we become a 501(c)(3) [nonprofit] and start having more youth volunteers and workshops, and receiving more grants, we're always going to be deliberate about the fact that we're an all-ages, intergenerational space as opposed to a youth space. At the same time, we've been able to learn a lot from youth organizations. If we imagine a continuum between DIY art spaces and teen center nonprofits, there is a lot of fertile territory to explore in between those two poles." The same sort of spectrum can describe the difference between many truly grassroots, all-volunteer efforts and those of more established institutions.

And then, not surprisingly, we found ourselves neck deep in a conversation about age issues and funding.

"You know people are much more sympathetic to supporting a 15- or 16-year-old than someone who is 20," Lori stated, pointing to the limitations of fundraising as a nonprofit. (It's important to clarify here that the Neutral Zone has been, and presumably always will be, a teen center. It hasn't changed its age focus to follow funding, although many organizations do.)

I explained how this phenomenon affected the development of the Vera Project. "We used to call ourselves a youth center only to one audience [funders], but we wouldn't say that anywhere else because we didn't consider ourselves a youth

center in the way that most people imagine it. Our membership was usually ages 14 to 30. The more we had to say it to funders, however, the more we became a youth center, and the term appeared more and more on outreach materials, on our website, in the press, and in our programs."

Starting out less defined, filing nonprofit papers, and then gravitating toward an age range provided next to a check box on grant applications is not uncommon, or even all bad.

As the Vera Project grew and replaced its founders with new staff, launched a $2 million capital campaign, and signed a ten-year lease, the organizational work and leadership moved further away from being directed by youth members in the name of serving youth. In the effort to get more resources in order to serve more people in more ways, we found ourselves under pressure to have staff with more education, narrower program guidelines, and certain kinds of board members. This is not to say that having more educated staff, being well-connected in the community, and wanting to do better, more focused work is a bad thing, by any means, but it's critical to keep in check how it distances leaders from constituents, limits the imagination, and changes the course the work can take. This is a funding paradox and represents a strong professionalizing force that *all* social-change-focused nonprofits both enjoy and struggle against. Today, Vera, like many organizations, is intentionally trying to balance this by making sure that young people's voting power on key decisions is protected, without question.

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## THE CULTIVATION OF A "FIELD"

During the funding talk, I noticed we were referring to our organizations as representatives of a "field." "Are there any gaps that you see that are opportunities to be leveraged?" our facilitator asked.

"That's why I call other people. I mean, absolutely. That's the possibility of the field." Gavin said. "We need the Neutral Zone. We need YMR." He went on to explain that even though Oakland and Cincinnati are as different as night and day, YMR's existence gives a hip-hop program in Cincinnati a real chance. "This is not just some bunch of kids in Cincinnati trying something out of the blue; there are all these other places with proven track records."

Usually it's easy to see our organizations as competing for

money and attention from foundations, media, bands, and the music industry, and therefore scarcity is understandably an issue. Gavin's statement, pointing to the possibility of seeing and contributing to our field's collective impact, illustrates a hopeful pushing back against the pressure from foundations, local governments, and others to make our organizations seem wholly separate and unique. Thinking of the groups as a field helps us each have a sense of legitimacy and value.

"It seems like with AMP there are a few different, very distinct communities and then a few groups of outlying types," observed Chris from YMR. "You have punk rock, DIY, which brings its own sort of ethics, history, and approach vs. some of the more urban types of hip-hop organizing ... and you have youth centers [like the Neutral Zone] somewhere in between, or maybe in another cluster altogether. So I think the trick is speaking all three languages, or ten languages, and to find a place to build bridges where it's relevant and helpful for sharing resources."

"What's interesting is that we keep using this word 'field' but then also 'coalition' or 'network,'" I pointed out. "But those terms mean different things."

I stated that "field," in many ways, felt more accurate to our group of organizations than other terms. "Coalition," for example, would imply more of a concrete vision we all shared and agreed to work toward (maybe we're getting there, though!), and other terms such as "network" or "association" imply that we are simply a group of franchises.

However, a respect for diversity is often welcome within a defined field. In an academic or professional field, for example, there are going to be really diverse opinions. There are going to be warring sides that are trying to figure something out and then a lot of people in the middle who are finding consensus around various smaller theories. Being able to frame our work as a field feels expansive and true to the experimental and entrepreneurial nature of our organizations. It invites us to try new ideas, forms, and models — and then share our knowledge. Being able to do this at the community, practitioner level, is powerful.

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## ARE WE TALKING ABOUT CULTURAL CHANGE OR SOCIAL CHANGE, AND WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE?

Building off the earlier discussion, we got back to articulating

our organizations' intent and framing of social and cultural change.

"My personal take is that artists' role in society is that they can see things before they happen," began YMR's Chris. "Their role in producing art is to try to alert the rest of the community or society to 'Wake up! Look at this!' and hopefully create some action. I think that cultural change by definition preempts social change, and social change happens as a reflection of [change] in cultural values." This is a very useful context in which to see Youth Movement Records. The organization is primarily focused on giving voice to and centering the young people most affected by the need for change. Listening to the tracks like "Change the Nation" or "Free Style" (as in freedom style) created by YMR artists, the need for action, as well as the galvanizing call, is clear.

Lori from the Neutral Zone explained a little bit about how she's trying to understand culture's function in her work. "I think [culture] is sort of a consciousness of the way that people think, the way they understand the place that they live in and the way that they interact with one another, and it's the way they express their interaction or the way they sing, the way they write, or the way they perform. It's a way of internalizing and understanding the way things are. And to change that internal hegemonic perception of [culture] is a big piece, I think. Social change, then, to me, is identifying more of the actual policies, practices, and laws [that need to change]. With that definition, the Neutral Zone is really functioning more on the cultural change [side]. It's raising the consciousness of young people, that they are competent, capable individuals, that they should have ownership." Ownership is perhaps the key piece in the Neutral Zone's change agenda, which is a powerful one in a culture where youth are not actually allowed to own anything, not even their own bodies. Though Lori stated that the Neutral Zone is focused on changing internal perception, and therefore culture, it should be pointed out that the culture of youth ownership is backed up by organizational policy and community organizing strategies (see Chapter 3).

Gavin went next. "So the crux of it: does the organization see itself as doing cultural or social change work? Probably neither, actually. Our mission is to inspire and engage. You can't make cultural change unless you have a culture and are connected with people. Or, like I say to people all the time, Elementz is this youth center that has street credibility — and then pretty much all I do all day is figure out how to define

street credibility." Street credibility being the thing that helps an organization like Elementz get connected with young people and helps young people get connected to one another, to create their own culture and develop the power to make change.

"I think culture is absolutely manipulated at this point — it's just not manipulated by us, it's not manipulated for the right reasons," Gavin said. "But I think we have a responsibility to try to push back and get it to that free place ... you are not just trying to recreate culture so that it can be used to push an agenda, you are trying to allow culture to be free."

After a pause, Kevin started speaking. "Well, the Department of Safety, at its founding, was operating on a lot of different levels. It definitely wasn't a service project, though they were interested in a transformative, sustainable creative community. They wrote manifestos and deployed all this Marxist rhetoric, yet maintained a radical humility in their actual expectations about what they would be able to accomplish. Now I think that we're permanently radical by virtue of existing where we exist and by doing the kind of work that we're doing in the place that we're doing it. It reflects the state of cultural politics in America today, where we've left small towns and rural areas out, and abandoned them to be taken over by the monoculture. Huge swaths of the country have been labeled 'red states' or defined as cultural wastelands, and by putting together [an argument] that says, 'No, actually, the town you are in is valuable, and worth your attention. You and your friends are capable of doing really good things,' it breaks down that binary between social and cultural by really short-circuiting the fundamental dynamic at work."

"Sort of like a personal is political thing?" Gavin asked.

"Sort of," Kevin answered, and expanded on the importance of getting young people to stay invested in the rural and conservative communities they grew up in. "Radical alternatives in unexpected places."

And so while Kevin and Gavin are working in different contexts, they both see a value in working outside of wealthier, coastal areas already known to be more progressive.

The group's youngest member, Diaris, from UCLA, gave some context to doing student-led hip-hop programming. "It's different at UCLA. We're not catering to hip-hop communities, or lower-income and lower-middle-class communities, because UCLA is between Bel Air and Beverly Hills. It's far away from the communities that hip-hop often represents. I wouldn't say that it's cultural change we're working toward at UCLA. It's

more to embrace the many facets of that culture. I'm trying to change the hip-hop and the student community and by extension change the communities in which those people live. 'Cause we kind of each live in several communities. I'm part of the West Indian community, I'm part of the black community, I'm part of the hip-hop community, I'm part of the dancer community. We all have different parts of our identity."

Diaris's point hung somewhat heavily in the room, as we noticed the importance of qualifying what "cultural change" meant. It had sort of already come up in our brainstorm session, but it was important to reiterate. For the sake of this conversation, we used the term to imply the unraveling of mainstream culture built on hyper-individualized, consumer-based lifestyles, one-dimensional art and pop culture — this is to say, hegemonic white mass culture. Our perspectives and backgrounds all influence how we understand that term in different and loaded ways.

When it was my turn, I echoed a lot of what had been said and added, "I think about space, like physical space and its role in cultural change and social change. For Vera, I feel like the space was what was holding the possibility for there to be social change within that cultural community." Because two of Vera's founders (James Keblas and myself) had studied the social side of urban planning, you can see why Vera's consistent focus on demanding space from the city and working to hold and shape it in particular ways informed our perspective.

In follow-up emails, Katy Otto offered these thoughts about the multifaceted work she's been doing in Washington, D.C., largely associated with Positive Force. "Social and cultural change are interrelated. Engaging in a cultural practice humanizes people for each other — e.g., if you listen to music or read books or view art from a group of people you have a little more insight into their lives. When you have more insight into other people, it becomes harder to dehumanize them." Katy went on to explain that Positive Force engages in social change by acting as a youth volunteer corps that helps different community organizations and uses art and music as a means of raising money and raising awareness about different issues.

Britt Curtis, who lives and works in Reno, Nevada, said simply that social and cultural change go hand in hand. By working in Reno, the Holland Project strives "to change the dynamics of an adult-centric town and empower young people to be a part of Reno and help grow and shape it, instead of fleeing to other cities and towns."

Kameron Moore-Mitchell in New Orleans sees music as a universal language and galvanizing force. She wrote, "When you have universal communication among any culture or community at large, that tool is a powerful one." To her, social and cultural change are also one and the same, and music is instrumental.

From here, the group dialogue began to wrap up and shift to discuss the business of how we can more effectively work together, touching on the tip of a rather large iceberg that we and lots of other people (including you) will be working on for years to come.

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## CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Gathering different organizations for critical reflection across large differences in geography and sociopolitical environments was a huge feat. It was powerful to have the opportunity to both better understand one another's work and to have the chance to reverse the notion of praxis — applying theory to work — and instead apply our work to developing a theory: that there is a promising social movement in the United States centered on young people and music subcultures.

But what is at the heart of this movement? Does it have tangible social change goals? Is it an entry point for thinking about activism or a tool for doing social work? Should underground music and art be kept separate from social or political organizing in order to uphold art for art's sake, or is it an underutilized part of resistance and struggle? How do we honor all this complexity but keep the work straightforward and still laugh and have fun? These are questions that continually come up for all of us and, not surprisingly, we all weigh in differently.

The possibility of cultivating an understanding of our differences — as well as identifying the strongest overlap in our visions for change and the best ways to work toward that vision at the local and national level — is the ambitious reason we got together.

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## AFTERWORD

I want to acknowledge this group of people for allowing me the opportunity to capture and reflect back on our conversation. The idea behind collaboratively writing this essay was that it was best to address the social impact of youth music

organizations as a group. In doing so, it is nonetheless impossible to separate the retelling from my own perspective and background as a white, middle-class, college-educated woman raised in Christian culture.

It's also important to recognize the weightiness of using the term "movement." The language of revolutionary movements is ever more co-opted by non-revolutionaries (like corporations, nonprofits, and governments) both to sell us stuff and to change the way we relate to the notion of social movements. Can you really be part of a movement by buying a product or making a donation to a federally sanctioned nonprofit? Probably not.

Still, a lot of nonprofits and community groups decide to make the smaller revolutions that must be fought day by day. For our organizations, those revolutions are things like a young person having a safe place to go, a place to let down his guard when he doesn't have that anywhere else; a young person connecting to an alternative culture when she lives in the middle of nowhere and feels out of place in her own body, family, school, and community; and places for diverse young artists to find and evolve their work in supportive and collaborative environments.

For these revolutions, music is where many of us begin.

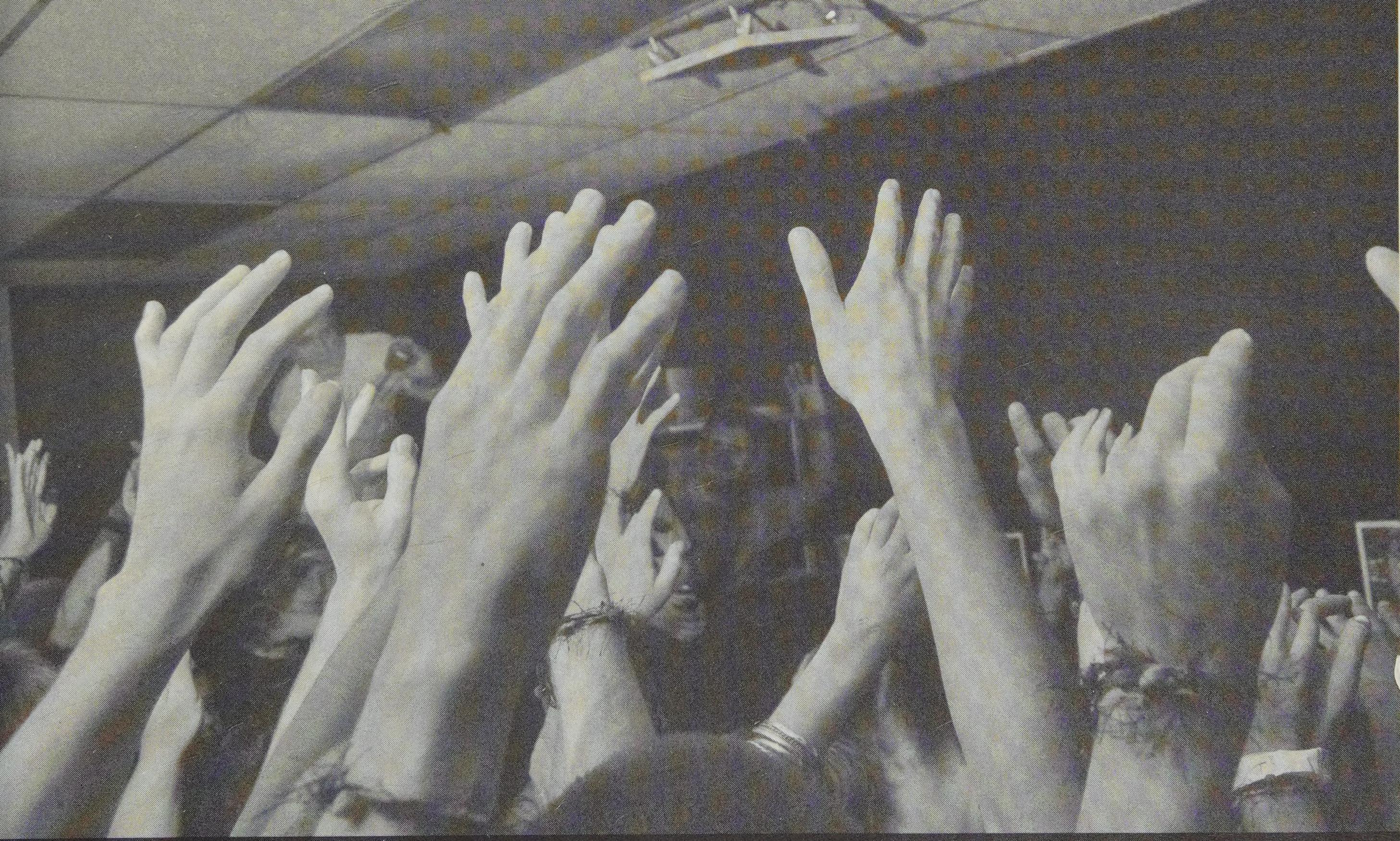


Photo: Peter Moran


LOREN PURCELL

# RESOURCES

The conversation doesn't end here. With your help, we're building a library of resources that includes:

- Sample strategic plans, bylaws, and policies
- Resources for collective organizing and consensus-building
- Sample organizational and event budgets
- Sample grant applications and other grant-seeking and fundraising tools
- Sample press releases, press lists, and marketing tools
- An extensive bibliography, with books, documentaries, and other resources on a variety of relevant topics
- Extended interviews with founders of successful organizations
- Legislation and city ordinances from past all-ages battles
- The latest research on the economic and cultural benefits of youth music spaces
- Information about organizations that can get you hooked up with tools for working with artists, low-cost liability insurance policies, fiscal sponsorship, and even health insurance
- and much more ...

It's too much information and it's changing too quickly to fit it into this book, so we're putting it all online.

And we want you to join the conversation.

- Connect with organizers from across the nation in our online **forum**. Share what's working in your city or town, and find out what solutions have emerged in other communities.
- Add your organization to our national **database** of youth music organizations and all-ages venues. Put yourself on the map and help us show our collective strength.
- Become a monthly sustaining supporter of AMP and help us continue to make these free resources available.

**HTTP://ALLAGES.NET/MANUALFESTO**

## THANKS AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

There are tons of people who have sat in thousands of meetings, worked in studios for long hours, and put on hundreds of shows, usually for little or no money in order to start organizations like the one in this book. I would like to dedicate this book to them, and specifically to Kate Becker, James Keblas, Josh Ayala, David Meinert, Cindy Peterson, Stephanie Pure, and Richard Conlin, hardworking visionaries that I'm honored to have worked with in starting the Vera Project.

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